

2

2021

Filozofski vestnik

Filozofski vestnik

THE CONCEPT OF WORLD  
IN CONTEMPORARY  
PHILOSOPHY

Edited by  
Rok Benčin

Založba ZRC



ISSN 0353 4510  
Letnik/Volume XLII  
Številka/Number 2  
Ljubljana 2021

# Filozofski vestnik

ISSN 0353-4510

## Programska zasnova

Filozofski vestnik (ISSN 0353-4510) je glasilo Filozofskega inštituta Znanstveno-raziskovalnega centra Slovenske akademije znanosti in umetnosti. Filozofski vestnik je znanstveni časopis za filozofijo z interdisciplinarno in mednarodno usmeritvijo in je forum za diskusijo o širokem spektru vprašanj s področja sodobne filozofije, etike, estetike, politične, pravne filozofije, filozofije jezika, filozofije zgodovine in zgodovine politične misli, epistemologije in filozofije znanosti, zgodovine filozofije in teoretske psihoanalize. Odprt je za različne filozofske usmeritve, stile in šole ter spodbuja teoretski dialog med njimi.

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Izid revije je finančno podprla Javna agencija za raziskovalno dejavnost Republike Slovenije. Filozofski vestnik je ustanovila Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti.

## Aims and Scope

*Filozofski vestnik (ISSN 0353-4510) is edited and published by the Institute of Philosophy of the Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts. Filozofski vestnik is a philosophy journal with an interdisciplinary character. It provides a forum for discussion on a wide range of issues in contemporary political philosophy, history of philosophy, history of political thought, philosophy of law, social philosophy, epistemology, philosophy of science, cultural critique, ethics, and aesthetics. The journal is open to different philosophical orientations, styles and schools, and welcomes theoretical dialogue among them.*

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*Filozofski vestnik is published with the support of the Slovenian Research Agency. Filozofski vestnik was founded by the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts.*

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ISSN 0353-4510

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Revija izhaja trikrat letno. | *The journal is published three times annually.*

Letna naročnina: 21 €. Letna naročnina za študente in dijake: 12,50 €.

Cena posamezne številke: 10 €. | *Annual subscription: €21 for individuals, €40  
for institutions. Single issues: €10 for individuals, €20 for institutions. Back issues  
are available.*

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Založba ZRC  
p. p. 306, 1001 Ljubljana  
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Oblikovanje | *Design*: Pekinpah  
Tisk | *Printed by*: Cicero Begunje  
Naklada | *Print run*: 380

Roland Végső\*

## On Acosmic Realism

As far as the idea of the “world” is concerned, the basic coordinates of our historical moment could be briefly outlined in reference to the following three points:

1. We are living in a historical era that is increasingly defined by a generalized sense of cultural disorientation. This experience is often described as the loss of a common or shared world.
2. However, it is no longer possible to tie the subjective experience of this loss to the simple objective loss of the world (which was the dominant paradigm of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). Rather, the current moment is defined by a peculiar tension: on the one hand, the subjective sense of loss corresponds to the uncontrollable objective proliferation of technologically enhanced mediated worlds (to everyone their own world); on the other hand, the looming specter of a global climate catastrophe threatens us with the total destruction of the human world. To use the artist Hito Steyerl’s diagnosis, we are suffering from having “too much world.”<sup>1</sup>
3. A common response to this excess of worlds threatening us with a complete loss of the world today is a growing desire for re-orientation. Where will we find a stable foundation, something finally real or something absolute, which could give us back our lost sense of order? Should we create a new common world? Or should we dream up a workable confederation of many new worlds? Or should we simply let the inherent infinity of worlds guide us toward our shared destiny with the hope that, at the end of the day, it will have been worth it?

In the end, what the current situation might reveal to us, however, is that this common sense of loss is partially structured by an illusion – an illusion that we

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<sup>1</sup> See Hito Steyerl, *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War*, New York, Verso, 2019, p. 148.

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now have a chance to lose. We all know that the argument according to which we once had a shared common world that we have lost only yesterday is simply false: in our most recent histories, we would be hard put to identify a shared world that was not also at the same time a world of countless exclusions of various degrees of cruelty. The suspicion arises here that this shared, common world that we are already mourning today has never existed. If that is the case, however, it is not entirely clear why we would expect it to save us. In order to at least start imagining a history beyond this illusion, therefore, let us begin here by briefly examining some of the philosophical aspects of this unsettling situation.

### Subjective *Weltschmerz*: Epistemological Delirium

While today hardly anyone needs a reminder that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe bequeathed to us the much cherished concept of *Weltliteratur*, it appears to be of significantly less academic interest these days that the optimism of this protean category has been immediately undermined by another popular 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary term that is often indirectly derived from Goethe's works as well: *Weltschmerz*.<sup>2</sup> Arguably, these two categories of Goethean descent could be treated as opposing twin paradigms of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary imagination of the "world". While *Weltliteratur* designates a hope for a nascent universality beyond the nation, *Weltschmerz* evokes the pain and suffering caused by not being able to find our proper place in this world. The tension between the two terms is quite palpable: while one of them celebrates the coming literary constitution of the world, the other already begins to mourn this world. What this juxtaposition reveals is that, in spite of the fundamentally pejorative connotations that the term *Weltschmerz* had accrued by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we

<sup>2</sup> While the first appearance of the term *Weltschmerz* is attributed to Jean Paul's posthumously published 1827 novel *Selina* ("Gott, um den *Weltschmerz* auszuhalten, muß die Zukunft sehen"), the general literary phenomenon that it now names is usually derived by historians of literature from Goethe's *Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers* (1774). Although throughout its history the concept has accumulated various theological, political, social, psychological meanings, there appears to be a general critical consensus that it is a "genuinely modern phenomenon." See Burkhard Meyer-Sickendiek, "Weltschmerz", in C. Rohde, T. Valk, and M. Mayer (eds.), *Faust Handbuch: Konstellationen, Diskurse, Medien*, Stuttgart, J. B. Metzler Verlag, 2018, p. 254. For the specifically philosophical meaning of the term, see Frederick C. Beiser, *Weltschmerz: Pessimism in German Philosophy, 1860-1900*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.

could treat it as a symptom of the impossibility of *Weltliteratur*. In this sense, it functions as a displaced recognition of the fact that “world” and “literature” cannot be linked together into a single concept without at least some pain and suffering. Going beyond the context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, then, we could argue that something akin to the historical phenomenon of *Weltschmerz* emerges every time the ideological constitution of the world fails.

We seem to be living today in an age that once again is reactivating these 19<sup>th</sup>-century debates – albeit in ways that are now adjusted to a different historical situation. On the one hand, all the available empirical evidence seems to suggest that we are living in an era of “world literature”. The uncontrollable proliferation within the humanities of the debates about “world literature” are just one manifestation of this tendency of our times.<sup>3</sup> In fact, we might be able to go further than this obvious diagnosis and speak of the ideological hegemony of a new kind of *Weltliteratur* that goes beyond the strictly speaking “literary” products and their academic interpretations so as to include all kinds of discourses about the “world” today – from officially endorsed theories of economic globalization, to scientific treatises on the Anthropocene, environmental protest movements, philosophical pamphlets, all the way to world-historical conspiracy theories, etc. On the other hand, all of these discussions have been conducted in an increasingly more ominous apocalyptic tone. The only thing that seems to be able to match the self-evidence of this fetishization of “world literature” is the certainty that the world as we know it is about to end. The religious variety of this kind of contemporary apocalypticism is the least surprising development of our times. Our “discontent” with our civilizations has apparently reached a new intensity that seems to have rendered obsolete the fundamental coordinates of collective knowledges. We no longer seem to be able to find our home in this world that this new world literature promised us.

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<sup>3</sup> After its initial formulation by Goethe in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and its mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century reprisal by Eric Auerbach, the category of “world literature” took on new life in the 1990s. Based on the works of Djelal Kadir, Pascale Casanova, David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, Gayatri Spivak, and countless others, the term has become the focus of endless debates. Since this critical literature is too expansive to review here in a meaningful way, I will merely refer to the following two titles both for the synthesis that they offer as well as for their polemical ambitions: Emily Apter, *Against World Literature*, New York, Verso, 2013; and Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2016.

What are the most salient characteristics of our contemporary *Weltschmerz*? As Bruno Latour put it, “the abandonment of a common world leads to epistemological delirium.”<sup>4</sup> This “epistemological disaster” that we have been living through over the last few decades might be understood as a generalization of this new *Weltschmerz*.<sup>5</sup> While in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, arguably, the problem registered by this term was that the alienated European intellectual could no longer find his or her class basis in a rapidly transforming society and became homeless, today the phenomenon can no longer be localized so evidently. We could say that *Weltschmerz* has been “globalized” – both in the sense that it is no longer possible to tie it to one specific geographical location, and also in the sense that it can emerge from any segment of society. As such a mobile and generalized condition, it is now no longer the symptomatic exception, but increasingly the norm of dominant discourses. The carefully coordinated distance that kept the optimism of *Weltliteratur* and the pessimism of *Weltschmerz* apart from each other in the 19<sup>th</sup> century seems to have collapsed. Mourning the loss of a shared world is the only *Weltliteratur* we are left with today.

Thus, precisely when the world of the old *Weltliteratur* was about to be realized, a new kind of *Weltschmerz* emerged. This one, however, is not the lyrical melancholia of the failed petit bourgeois poet, nor the naïve enthusiasm of the adolescent mind, but something altogether different as it is based on confrontations with new types of universality – among which ecological disaster stands out as certainly one of the most threatening. This new *Weltschmerz* (although not without its own histories), then, assumes that our current historical moment is unprecedented. Yes, we can trace the histories of how we got to this point, teetering on the edge of the simultaneous realization of global humanity and the total destruction of our living environments. But the magnitude of the catastrophes that we are facing is without meaningful precedent. We are no longer or not yet in the field of historical repetition. The old Marxian maxim, according to which history repeats itself first as tragedy, then as farce, no longer seems to apply. The tragedy we are currently facing (which might reach the scale of the literal ending of the world) breaks down the logic of this repetition – we are deprived of the mental relief of the prospect of farcical futures. Should

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<sup>4</sup> Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. C. Porter, Cambridge, Polity, 2018, p. v.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.

this understanding of history be correct, we would find ourselves in a strange situation: the present is outside repetition since it is unprecedented (it is not the repetition of the past) and, therefore, by ending this specific history, it will not be incorporated into a future history in which it could be repeated. The idea of a final ecological catastrophe itself implies that humanity as such will undergo it only once. The lesson of our times is, therefore, clear: the *Weltliteratur* of global humanity ends with the *Weltschmerz* of extinction.

One of the more remarkable recent documents of this new *Weltliteratur* is Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's *The Ends of the World* (first published in 2014 and revised in 2015). What makes this book so noteworthy is that Danowski and de Castro systematically map the basic coordinates of our contemporary *Weltschmerz*. In effect, they designed a combinatory machine that, based on structural principles, constitutes a system of eight available positions. The only two necessary elements of this matrix are the "world" and "us" (the inhabitants of this world), while everything else can be derived from the mutual irreducibility to each other of these two categories. In other words, the pain of our world is still born of the same old conflict that gave us *Weltschmerz* in the first place: there is no possible reconciliation between the self and the world. We can, then, proceed from here following the logic of subtraction. In other words, we can take away one of the elements of the self/world dyad and proceed as if the other did not exist. Next, these two options can be expanded upon by way of positing a temporal priority: we can imagine that one of the two elements existed "before" or will continue to exist "after" the other. These four basic options can be redoubled by attributing a fundamentally "positive" or "negative" value to this absence/priority. Accordingly, today, we can imagine a "world without us" (for example, speculative realism), an "us without a world" (Kantian transcendental idealism and accelerationism), a "world before us" (the religious discourse on Eden or the Romantic discourse on nature as wilderness), and a "world after us" (as in Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us*, or in the so-called Voluntary Extinction Movement). Depending on our own dispositions, each of these four positions can serve as a source of exhilarated jubilation or a cause for cosmic alarm.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*, trans. R. Nunes, Cambridge, Polity, 2017, pp. 19–22.



Nevertheless, the way “speculative realism” appears in this apocalyptic fresco so skillfully painted by the authors remains quite instructive. Relying on the works of Quentin Meillassoux and Ray Brassier, Danowski and de Castro offer us two different (potentially conflicting) images of this philosophical position: in one of them, speculative realism is a radical affirmation of the world; in the other, it declares the world to be always already dead. On the one hand, speculative realism appears here as a representative of the “world without us” scenario due to its radical reassertion of “a world independent of all experience.”<sup>7</sup> Rejecting the inherent worldlessness of all forms of philosophical idealism, speculative realism teaches us the “absolute pre-eminence of a world without people as the ultimate guarantee of any authentic materialism.”<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, however, the authors also conclude that, for speculative realism, the end of the world is the very mode of existence of the world: “One could say that, for these thinkers, to speak of an ‘end of the world,’ far from a pragmatic contradiction [...], is, on the contrary, a sheer metaphysical tautology, a trivial ontological pleonasm: the end is the world’s mode of ‘existence.’”<sup>9</sup> Speculative realism gives us a “a world, in fact, that is radically dead.”<sup>10</sup> After all, it appears that the worldlessness of idealism (which holds that the transcendental subject can never access the world in itself) is countered here by the worldlessness of realism (which posits a radically dead world that only exists in the mode of its ending). Does this paradoxical absolute affirmation and absolute negation of the world make speculative realism itself a symptomatic site for our contemporary *Weltschmerz*?

### Objective *Weltschmerz*: Too Much World

In order to be able to move beyond the confines of the map provided by Danowski and de Castro, it might be time to pick up one of the young Walter Benjamin’s suggestions from 1913: “We want the *Weltschmerz* at last to become objective.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>11</sup> See Walter Benjamin, “Romanticism: Reply of the ‘Unsanctified’”, in *Walter Benjamin: Early Writings 1910-1917*, trans. H. Eiland, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 132. In addition, for more discussions on this modern pain of the world, see also in the same volume the essay “The Happiness of Ancient Man”, p. 228.

Benjamin's goal was the rejection of the misguided Romanticism of his own generation. He calls for a Romanticism that is now "objective" rather than "subjective" in orientation – in the context of our current discussion, we could call it a realist rather than an idealist *Weltschmerz*. We can take Benjamin's strategy seriously: in order to fight the neo-Romantics of his time, he proposes a new kind of Romanticism that is finally devoid of Romantic subjectivism (he calls it a "sober Romanticism"). Similarly, we could counter the apocalypticism of our times by turning its *Weltschmerz* against itself. Although Benjamin himself does not make this connection explicitly, in his early works we can find a model for this objectivized *Weltschmerz* in the concluding sections of his essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (1916) where he discusses the "deep sadness of nature": "It is a metaphysical truth that all nature would begin to lament if it were endowed with language. [...] Because she is mute, nature mourns."<sup>12</sup> Following this logic, then, our task could be to imagine a field of objectivity that already includes in its very constitution a certain principle of "mourning". Even before or independently of the advent of the subject, the world was already suffering – a radically dead world that nevertheless exists in the mode of its perpetual ending is a world that mourns itself.

So, what would this finally "objective" *Weltschmerz* look like today? Its presupposition would not be that the human subject cannot be reconciled to the world, but that the world cannot be reconciled to itself. In other words, suffering would no longer be located in the human subject as it would have to be inscribed objectively into the world. The world itself suffers from something – but this something cannot be conceived in transcendent terms. To put it differently, the call for objectivism here means that the world is not suffering from something other than itself (which prevents it from finally becoming a world) but simply suffers itself. "Suffering", as an objective process could be conceived as a technical term for a desubjectivized mode of existence that is haunted by an inexistence (the mourned object). The manner of existence of mind-independent reality is this suffering: undergoing or being subjected to being. The human "pain" that *Schmerz* refers to would be merely one possible modality of this objectivized suffering: the subjectivized human suffering. In fact, what we know

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<sup>12</sup> See Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man", trans. E. Jephcott, in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1, 1913-1926*, M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings (eds.), Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 72–73.

as the human subject might very well be nothing other than one specific way the world suffers this non-existence. The most extreme form of articulating this inexistence, however, would be to turn this mourning against itself: the world itself suffers from the suspicion that it does not exist.

But the difficulty of imagining a world that mourns and even mourns itself is quite evident. Before we even begin to imagine it, the project of this objectivation immediately runs into an obvious problem: the category of the “world” is (to say the least) overdetermined. To provide an objective definition of *Weltschmerz*, we might have to first produce a definition of the world itself – not a particularly easy or enjoyable task. To make things more complicated, it is quite obvious that the category of the “world” has been employed in cosmological, ontological, phenomenological, theological, political, aesthetic, etc., discourses in a number of different ways – often simultaneously in multiple registers. Already the Kantian “destruction of the cosmos” introduced the suspicion that the idea of the world will never meet its corresponding empirical object.<sup>13</sup> A new kind of objective *Weltschmerz* emerges here: objectively speaking, it is not clear whether we can even speak about the world.

Thus, before venturing a proper definition, we might have to set ourselves a seemingly more modest (or even more “objective”) initial task: let us look around ourselves and count the number of worlds we find around us. In order to find some stable points of reference for this exercise, we could rely here on the classic metaphysical categories that we inherited from various ontological doctrines: monism, dualism, and pluralism. How many worlds are there? Here are some of the, no doubt, already familiar common answers:

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1. *There is one world:* Cosmologically speaking, among the ancients, we could refer to Aristotle as one of the most influential proponents of the fundamental unity of the world. Then, through the scholastic mediation of Aristotelian ideas, this position has also become a fundamental assumption of early modern science (for example, in Newton).

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<sup>13</sup> On this Kantian destruction of the cosmos, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, New York, Verso, 2000, pp. 59–66; Philipp Weber, *Kosmos und Subjektivität in der Frühromantik*, Leiden, Wilhelm Fink, 2017, pp. 27–56.

2. *There are two worlds:* We often blame Plato or, more precisely, Platonism for establishing the kind of “two-world” theories that have provided the fundamental framework for a significant part of Western thought. Even if Plato’s cosmos is on some fundamental level singular and One, this cosmos is nevertheless divided between the visible and invisible worlds. Hence the traditional separation of *mundus sensibilis* and *mundus intelligibilis* that has remained an operative force for so long (for example, Hannah Arendt classified any form of thought that distinguishes true Being from mere Appearance as such a “two-world theory”).<sup>14</sup> Yet, the most familiar form of this duality in the West comes to us from Christianity (and, in its negative form, from Nietzsche’s critique of the *Hinterwelt*).
3. *There are many worlds:* Among the Ancients, Atomism and Stoicism provided two basic paradigms of the plurality of worlds (spatial and temporal plurality). Thereafter, the question whether (both ontologically and phenomenologically) we need to be able to speak about the plurality and even the infinity of worlds has been a recurrent problem for philosophy. In different forms, we can trace this question in the works of Descartes and Leibniz all the way to Alain Badiou.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, this hasty sketch remains insufficient for a number of different reasons. In reality, it is difficult to find pure cosmological systems in the Western philosophical tradition that do not end up mixing some of these categories. Nevertheless, this quick outline does allow us to reconstruct a recurrent logical sequence composed of three crucial steps: [1] even if we assume that there is a singular “world” that can be grasped somehow conceptually, [2] we find that this unity is often impossible to describe without reference to some kind of a fundamental internal division or antagonism (for example, the split between being and appearance) that reproduces the question of the unity of the given world in the form of an internal reduplication of this world, [3] which, finally, turns out to be an uncontrollable movement of the proliferation of internal divisions that can be escalated to such a degree that the initial conceptual unity of the world itself is undermined. As a result of this movement, the question of the unity of the world does not necessarily disappear from the problem of the

<sup>14</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, New York, Harcourt, 1981, pp. 23–26.

<sup>15</sup> For a useful summary of these debates, see Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Worlds without End: The Many Lives of the Multiverse*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014.

world, but is perpetually displaced in a series of repetitions and merely returns on different scales. Based on the model of a “hermeneutical circle”, we could call this sliding effect a “cosmological circle”: unity leads to division – which in turn leads us back to the question of unity.<sup>16</sup>

The mere act of counting worlds, therefore, seems to lead us into the drift of this circular argument with the force of an unavoidable fate. The one leads to the many – which leads us to infinity – which leads us back to the question of the one since even the infinity of infinities seems to contain some principle of structuration that forces us to identify minimal units of existence. A conclusion that could be drawn from this state of affairs is that worlds cannot be counted (in the sense that the act of “counting” already presupposes a pre-established unit of counting: the world). It appears that this difficulty itself is a sign of the objective nature of *Weltschmerz*. How can we get out of this circle, then? As a first step, in order to move beyond the reductive arithmetic of the three options listed above (one, two, infinity), we can immediately cite here two additional cosmological traditions whose calculations end up with quite different conclusions: Gnosticism and acosmism. What is potentially interesting about these two traditions in this context is that, at least temporarily, they shift our attention away from the endless dialectic of the one and infinity toward a calculus of smaller magnitudes: under their guidance, we enter the domain of the “less than one.”

Thus, in this context, we would underline the significance of the Gnostic heresy for the simple reason that it could allow us to talk about a “failed world”: a world that is not quite one without being nothing. Strictly speaking, of course, Gnostic worldlessness would still fall within the domain of Christian “two-world” theories: even if our human world is an incomplete project, the world of God, the world of salvation, is still posited as another real world. So, the fundamental dualisms of Gnosticism are still there but the world (our world) is now reduced to the status of a literal *demi-monde* (a *Halbwelt*): a partial world that exists without being a closed unity. This world that is not one anymore becomes the model of a recurrent pattern that is often evoked in discussions of Gnosticism but seems to point beyond this specific tradition. In a similar spirit,

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<sup>16</sup> For example, in *Worlds without End*, Mary-Jane Rubenstein argues that in these cosmological systems singularity and infinity always end up mixing with each other. She calls these dynamics “multiplicity.” See *ibid.*, p. 26.

Peter Sloterdijk has recently argued that Gnosticism reduced the world to the status of mere “bad partial objects.”<sup>17</sup> The Gnostic hostility toward the world was based on the Pauline “as if not” that established the necessary distance from the world that would eventually allow a wholesale negation of the world itself. But first, this world had to be dissembled before it could be negated. Nonetheless, as Sloterdijk’s paradoxical conclusion also shows, this is one of the essential limits of Gnosticism in this regard: “Even dark Gnosticism needs the scandalous world in order to flee from it.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus, in light of this contradiction, we have to consider the possibility that this “failed world” theory itself supposes too much about the world. At least this is the core message of that famous conversation between Max Brod and Franz Kafka that Brod reported in his 1921 essay “Der Dichter Franz Kafka” (the ur-text of all Kafka criticism):

I remember, Brod writes, a conversation with Kafka which began with present-day Europe and the decline of the human race.

“We are nihilistic thoughts, suicidal thoughts that come into God’s head,” Kafka said. This reminded me at first of the Gnostic view of life: God as the evil demiurge, the world as his Fall.

“Oh no,” said Kafka, “our world is only a bad mood of God, a bad day of his.”

“Then there is hope outside this manifestation of the world that we know.”

He smiled. “Oh, plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope – but not for us.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “But, before the total object ‘world’ could be taken distance from and criticized, the whole had to be dissembled into parts that could be negated – or, in modern parlance, into bad partial objects – and represented as such. The development of a position of animosity to the world is in fact accomplished through such steps both at the level of the history of affects and at the mythological level; it goes the whole way, from one bad aspect of the world to the badness of the whole of the world.” See Peter Sloterdijk, *After God*, trans. I. A. Moore, Cambridge, Polity, 2020, p. 50.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>19</sup> Max Brod, “Der Dichter Franz Kafka” in *Neue Rundschau* (November 1921), p. 1213. The translation that I reproduced here is taken from the English translation of Walter Benjamin’s “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death”, trans. H. Zohn, in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, 1927-1934*, M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland, and G. Smith (eds.), Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 798.

These are certainly well-known sentences. What might be worth highlighting here once again is that this conversation suggests that, for Kafka, even Gnosticism attributed too much consistency, too much substance, too much intentionality to our world. In order to understand our world, what we need is less than Gnosticism: not a fallen God but a suicidal one. We are presented here with the image of a God who is himself suffering from a kind of divine *Weltschmerz*. To be more precise, in God's suffering, the human world is merely a nihilistic thought, a mere suicidal ideation: a God that wants to kill himself incidentally produces this world as a passing bad mood. The world is this God's idea of the way he would kill himself. Yet, it appears that he does not do so in the end. In light of this God's pain, the insignificance of human suffering is further exacerbated by the reference to this whole episode merely constituting "a bad day" (an inverted Sabbath when God is not doing anything – however not because his work has been completed, but merely because he is too depressed to even move). All this suggests that God did not go through with the act: for the time being, at least, the idea was abandoned and the pain continues.<sup>20</sup>

Can we retranslate this God's suffering here as a kind of objectivized *Weltschmerz*? The problem is that this "world" now is nothing other than the way God suffers himself. In fact, the world is the suffering itself as it is objectivized in our world (the world is an objectivized mood and human *Weltschmerz* is just the re-subjectivization of God's own suffering). Our own dissatisfaction with the world merely mirrors this God's suffering. However, one could argue that, in the Kafka example, this suicidal God still represents a force that is external to the world – so we are not yet talking about a truly "objectivized" *Weltschmerz* here. In the anecdote, human subjective suffering is merely displaced to another kind of subjectivity. While the world is now the objectivization of this higher, transcendent form of pain, the story still suggests that we could simply blame all our sufferings on God. Human subjective *Weltschmerz* is projected onto a divine subjectivity. A step in the right direction, but how would this scenario look different if we simply removed God from this equation? Would the world mourn this God if, in the end, he really did commit suicide?

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<sup>20</sup> To put it differently, one of the ultimate metaphysical surprises of Kafka's world would not be simply that we human beings do not have hope, but that even God experienced its being as Joseph K. did his own.

We should not forget, however, that we do know from the history of philosophy a possible name for this “worldview” that offers us even less than a failed world: acosmism. The assertion of the absence or non-existence of the world. How many worlds are there? None. Unfortunately, we seem to know even less about acosmism as a philosophical tradition than about Gnosticism. In fact, it is a frequent complaint that, currently, no systematic treatment of philosophical acosmism in the literature seems to exist. As a result, it is a telling detail of the secondary literature that one of the most often cited starting points for discussions of acosmism remains Hans-Walter Schütte’s entry on “*Akosmismus*” in the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* – a meagre paragraph that briefly evokes Hegel’s critique of Spinoza (in the context of the atheism debate) following a reference to Fichte’s quip that he would rather be called an “acosmist” than an “atheist”. While these words might suggest that acosmism is nothing more than a properly groomed version of atheism, Schütte’s summary judgment is quite telling: acosmism is a “doctrine of worldlessness” that “has not developed its own philosophical theory.”<sup>21</sup> Caught somewhere between Spinozist monism and Fichtean subjective idealism, acosmism appears to lack its own philosophical substance – it appears as a mere specter that haunts other philosophies.<sup>22</sup> It is as if there were something not properly philosophical about the idea that the world does not exist and only a non-philosophy could devote proper attention to it.

### **Absolute Weltschmerz: Speculative Realism**

Is “acosmism”, then, the neglected philosophical tradition that could at least lead us one step closer to accomplishing the task of producing a finally objective *Weltschmerz*? The contemporary relevance of this question is certainly confirmed by the fact that some strands of acosmic thought did resurface recently in philosophical texts that also declare their allegiance to philosophical “realism”.<sup>23</sup> So, what are the chances of a contemporary acosmic realism that would

<sup>21</sup> Hans-Walter Schütte, “Akosmismus”, in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Vol. 1, J. Ritter, K. Gründer, and G. Gabriel (eds.), Basel, Schwabe, 1971, col. 128.

<sup>22</sup> For a recent attempt to locate Romantic acosmism precisely in this tension between Spinoza’s and Fichte’s philosophies, see Philipp Weber, “Romantic Acosmism: On Friedrich Schlegel’s Theory of an Unfinished World”, *The Germanic Review*, 96 (1/2021), pp. 23–40.

<sup>23</sup> One of the best-known versions of this “new realism” can be found in Markus Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist*, trans. G. Moss, Cambridge, Polity, 2017.



finally render *Weltschmerz* truly objective? If we see speculative realism as an expression of our contemporary *Weltschmerz*, the question that we need to pose here concerns the degree to which this philosophy can successfully objectivize the non-existence of the world. Countering Schütte's diagnosis, we might hope that the doctrine of worldlessness is finally about to receive its own philosophical theory.

What happens to the world when the project of (idealist) "critique" is replaced by that of (realist) "speculation"? Before rushing to an answer, we should consider here briefly Sloterdijk's attack on what he calls the *Weltschmerz* of Critical Theory in his early text *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Reflecting on the lachrymose melancholia of the Frankfurt School, Sloterdijk writes: "Critical Theory was based on the presupposition that we know this world *a priori*, through *Weltschmerz*. What we perceive of the world can be ordered in psychosomatic coordinates of pain and pleasure. Critique is possible inasmuch as pain tells us what is 'true' and what is 'false'."<sup>24</sup> As we can see, the core of this argument is that Critical Theory was essentially an attempt to turn subjective *Weltschmerz* into the guiding principle of an allegedly objective social analysis of a world that is no longer accessible to traditional epistemological critique. To put it differently, *Weltschmerz* functioned as the *a priori* condition of possibility for any properly modern critique as it accomplished two things at the same time: on the one hand, by virtue of being an "*a priori* pain," it established the necessary critical distance from the world by founding a specific standpoint from which the world can be judged; on the other hand, by virtue of being an "*a priori* pain," it also provided a concrete program with clear content for this critique: rejecting the false pleasures of the world.<sup>25</sup> What was registered in the works of Walter Benjamin, for example, was the pain of the times (*Zeitschmerz*): critique has become impossible due to the suffocating closeness of things precisely at a time when it was most necessary. This paradox gave rise to this "melancholy science" that Sloterdijk refers to as a "Sensitive Theory" that was often coded in terms of an elitist "aesthetic" critique of the world. But, and this is a crucial point here, in Sloterdijk's hands, this evaluation of Critical Theory as a utopian weaponization of *Weltschmerz* turns into a critique of "critique" in general. To

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. M. Eldred, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. xxxiii.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

put it differently, the entire program of critique is grounded in this *Weltschmerz* whose time is finally up. Sloterdijk, on the other hand, wanted to “cheer us up” from the “melancholy stagnation” of this moody suffering.<sup>26</sup>

Regardless of how happy we might be with such a conclusion, we are now certainly a step closer to accomplishing the task set out by Benjamin. For the least we can say here is that this *a priori Weltschmerz* already moves the discussion to a transcendental level. Taken in this sense, *Weltschmerz* is still subjective, but it no longer falls into the domain of empirical psychology. Rather, it now designates an inherent possibility of transcendental subjectivity: it emerges as an effect of the ability to create a distance from exclusively empirical experiences. It appears to be something like the affective (bodily) means of producing the transcendental/empirical difference itself – and, as such, if it is not necessarily the condition of possibility of any “critique”, it is at least an important prelude to it. To the degree that the field of objectivity is constituted by this transcendental subject, then, this *Weltschmerz* now has a potential role in this constitution. In fact, what Sloterdijk’s analysis suggests is that the transcendental subject of critique is by definition in a painful relation to the world that it itself co-constitutes. This suffering is the price the subject pays for having escaped the domain of pure empiricism. Thus, critique means suffering, since the transcendental subject that constitutes the world will never be fully part of this world.

Would it be possible to repeat Sloterdijk’s gesture here (his identification of “critique” with *a priori* pain) in relation to realism and ask whether “speculation” itself is a form of suffering? As we have seen, Danowski and de Castro have already introduced the idea that speculative realism is the simultaneous absolute affirmation and absolute negation of the world. Is it possible to maintain this perplexing position without the mediation of some kind of suffering? Let us start by noting that, in the broader discourse around speculative realism, a similar duality has been produced with regard to the question of “subjectivity”. In a sense, there is a crucial rift in speculative realism that becomes visible in the tension between asubjectivism and panpsychism. The same way that the idea of the world leads to a self-negating acosmism, the question of subjectivity leads to tension between a totalizing asubjectivism (the whole of the

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxxvii.

real is asubjective) and a totalizing subjectivism (the real is relational). The first position asserts that the absolute is asubjective: the only way to have (subjective) access to reality in itself is to conceive of it as completely devoid of subjectivity. The object-oriented splinter group, however, has moved in the direction of panpsychism: in this view, the very difference between the object and the subject is undermined by the hypothesis of fundamentally “sentient” objects. Of course, both trends assert the existence of a mind-independent reality that remains untotalizable – but as far as the nature of this incomplete reality is concerned, they certainly disagree.

In this context, Quentin Meillassoux’s “strange” materialism confronts us with a new set of questions, for the issue will no longer be whether science can think but whether science can suffer. Scandalously bypassing the Heideggerian problematic, Meillassoux suggests that science is capable of thinking the absolute.<sup>27</sup> But this thinking is predicated upon a complete negation of suffering. Philosophy begins where sufferings stops. Of course, the question is not whether individual philosophers or scientists can suffer – the same way the Heideggerian question did not concern specific individuals who happened to be scientists. But when the thinking of the absolute becomes identical with the thought of radical contingency, philosophy is called upon to bear witness to a certain kind of “death”: on the one hand, the substance of the world is dead matter; on the other hand, the world as we know it can cease to exist at any moment without any reason whatsoever. While some might object that the idea that anything can happen anytime without reason is a positive prescription for a permanent state of anxiety, Meillassoux certainly does not attach an *a priori* affect to the thought of radical contingency. In this regard, his attitude is quite different from that of a Heideggerian anxiety (which, in *Being and Time*, is precisely produced by exposure to the worldliness of the world). On this count, Meillassoux is deliberately and consistently silent. There is no explicitly formulated *Grundstimmung* for speculative materialism – not even in the face of death.

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<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of the proposition that “science thinks”, see Frank Ruda, “The Speculative Family, or: The Critique of the Critical Critique of Critique”, *Filozofski vestnik*, 33 (2/2012), p. 58.

This silence is understandable since Meillassoux is clearly just as allergic to subjectivism as to all forms of anthropomorphism when it comes to thinking the absolute. In its substance, then, the world is pure and simple death:

If there is a true critique of the subject, it must also be a critique of the subjective, and of its hypostasis: such a critique thus cannot *but* be materialist, since only the materialist absolutizes the pure non-subjective – the pure and simple *death*, with neither consciousness nor life, without any subjectivity whatsoever, that is represented by the state of inorganic matter – that is to say, matter anterior to and independent of every subject and all life.<sup>28</sup>

But what is the price that we have to pay for the discovery of the world of pure matter? The stakes of this enterprise first become visible in the distinction Meillassoux makes between speculative materialism and science. Speculation requires a certain anesthetic ascetism (as Meillassoux puts it: “*we prohibit ourselves from speaking of what is* – that is to say of what is *actual* – and speak only of that which *could really be*”). But the description of reality by science assumes the form of an absolutely necessary empiricism, an unavoidable aesthetic encounter with a “regime of experience” (Meillassoux defends “the exclusive right of experience to describe the inexhaustible intricacies of the real that make up our world”).<sup>29</sup> While there is no *a priori* suffering tied to speculation, science is after all a form of empirical suffering. The speculative philosopher gives up the world of experience and retreats into a dead world – in order to justify the scientist’s encounters with the living world. Standing on the sidelines, the materialist philosopher cheers on the scientist with the following chant: keep going, you have an absolute right to your suffering! Thereby, we now also have a categorical justification of an empirical *Weltschmerz* that proposes an unbridgeable abyss between the absolute (accessible only to speculative materialism) and the empirical sciences (whose role is now restricted to a description of the world as it is).

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<sup>28</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Sign Devoid of Meaning”, trans. R. Mackay and M. Gansen, in S. Malik and A. Avanesian (eds.), *Genealogies of Speculation: Materialism and Subjectivity since Structuralism*, London, Bloomsbury, 2016 p. 141.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

Hence the fundamentally mournful tone of these discussions. For we should keep in mind that death appears in at least two different forms in Meillassoux's arguments. First, individual death plays a crucial role in establishing the argument against correlationism. In essence, contrary to all correlationist objections, death becomes the first instance of an absolute that is thinkable. The absolute (that is, contingency) first becomes thinkable in the form of death (since death is a form of "the capacity-to-be-other" required by contingency).<sup>30</sup> Second, this death is then transposed into the absolute. Therefore, there is after all an anthropomorphic hypostasis at work here: not the hypostasis of human subjectivity but that of the death of the subject. When the generalized ontological capacity-to-be-other is coded as "death" rather than some other form of lifelessness, a minimal degree of anthropomorphism is reintroduced into the absolute. For the absolute is just as much deathless as it is lifeless. To speak of death before the miraculous emergence of life would imply that this emergence was not *ex nihilo* (as Meillassoux would want it to be) but somehow preordained by the very structure of lifeless matter.<sup>31</sup> The absolute is where the subject goes to die – a graveyard of human suffering. As a result, we now *know* for sure that there is a rift between the subject and the real.

At the other extreme of this spectrum we find Graham Harman explicitly calling for a "speculative psychology" of objects ("a still nonexistent field" that would provide "speculations on the different levels of psyche at different levels of objects").<sup>32</sup> Of course, the point here is not to project human psychology onto objects but the exact opposite: to redefine human psychology itself as merely one instantiation of a larger cosmic pattern. Thus, this psychology is not intended to be a direct projection of 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Weltschmerz* onto the cosmos: it "has nothing to do with a romantic conception of sensitive plants and weeping minerals."<sup>33</sup> Rather, following the logic of this reversal, the goal is to understand human *Weltschmerz* itself as a specific manifestation of a larger problem.

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<sup>30</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. R. Brassier, London, Continuum, 2008, pp. 55–57.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of the *ex nihilo* emergence of life out of lifeless matter, and consciousness out of life, see Quentin Meillassoux, "Excerpts from *L'Inexistence divine*", trans. G. Harman, in Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: A Philosophy in the Making*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2011, p. 175.

<sup>32</sup> Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, Winchester, Zero Books, 2011, p. 120.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

Let us recall that, according to Harman, “the basic rift in the cosmos lies between objects and relations.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, the classic form of *Weltschmerz* was correct to the degree that it posited an unbridgeable *rift* between the self and the world. But it was mistaken when it tried to universalize this abyss as a specifically *human* attribute because it assumed that “the human-world relation is the basis for all others, or at least for knowing about the others.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, one of the goals of this speculative psychology would be to finally identify the objective conditions of human *Weltschmerz*. And the answer is clear. Relationality itself is the author of this universal tragicomedy: the real ontological break is “between [objects’] autonomous reality outside all relation, and their caricatured form in the sensual life of other objects.”<sup>36</sup> The mere form of the relation of *Weltschmerz* is retained here in a purely objective manner: the entire dynamics take place in the relations between the inner essence and the sensual life of objects.

Yet, this “panpsychism” has to be articulated within a decidedly acosmic framework. To put it differently, in this infinite proliferation of objects, we do encounter an ultimate limit: “The cosmos has no bottom, but does have a surface. There may be an infinite regress, but no infinite progress: no final, encompassing object that could be called a universe.”<sup>37</sup> The world (in the sense of a single totality of all objects) cannot be objectivized since the logic of infinity undermines any objective totality. If every object is composed of other objects, we do have an infinite regress toward ever smaller objects; but there is no super-object that could contain this infinite regress. This is one of the reasons why the “pan” of “panpsychism” is by definition a hyperbole that has to be tamed by a kind of “polypsychism”. If there is no “all” that could be fully psychologized, we are left with the assumption that psychism does not apply to every object all of the time. It is possible to conceive of objects that are (at least temporarily) outside of all relationality.

But how does this definition of the partially psychologized infinite world relate to Harman’s understanding of objectivity in its most extreme (most pure

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119–120.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

and most objective) form? Careful to distinguish this domain of pure objectivity from mere death, Harman compares it to sleep: “dormant objects are the purest kind of objects we can study. They are not altogether lonely, since they do have pieces; they are simply not pieces of anything else, and therefore they do not perceive.”<sup>38</sup> What is striking about this definition of the dormant object is that it fully inverts Harman’s definition of the untotalizable world: after all, there are world-like ultimate objects in the cosmos. If a dormant object no longer participates in any higher relation (and does not itself perceive anything anymore), it does take on the function of the kind of super-object that a universe is supposed to be: it effectively totalizes an infinity of relations. It is a lonely object to the degree that it is completely withdrawn from any other “higher” relation; but it is not completely lonely to the degree that it contains multitudes. While the cosmos cannot be reduced to a single universe, it does contain potentially infinite universes in itself: these are the sleeping objects that contain an infinite number of other objects in themselves without being in a relation to anything outside themselves. Yet, the psychology of these lonely objects remains an inherent limit to the future discourse of speculative psychology. Since they fully reproduce the solipsistic rift of classic *Weltschmerz*, they condemn this psychology to an interminable suffering caused by its alienation from its own objective foundations: the withdrawal from the world.

Thus, caught between the desubjectivization of the absolute and the partial non-human psychologization of objectivity, we can detect the emergence of a certain pattern. If realism today is by definition acosmic, it is based on an inverted *Weltschmerz*. The agony of this science comes from a double relation to the world. On the one hand, we have to suffer from the consistent application of the idea that the world does not exist because it never existed. This is certainly not an easy task and it meets plenty of resistance along the way. On the other hand, we cannot deny the reality of the “idea” of the world. As an idea, the world still needs to be repeatedly accounted for. This is our new *Weltschmerz*, which surfaces in many discourses today but is quite palpable in the discourse of philosophical realism: although we know that the world does not exist, time after time we keep behaving as if it really did exist.

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

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