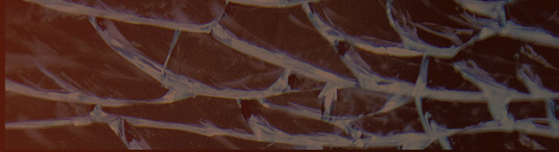


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Laruelle
A Stranger Thought

Anthony Paul Smith

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*J'éclate. Je suis le feu. Je suis la mer.
Le monde se défait. Mais je suis le monde.*

*La fin, la fin disions-nous.
Aimé Césaire, "Les armes miraculeuses"*

*Aimer un étranger comme soi-même implique comme contrepartie:
s'aimer soi-même comme un étranger.
Simone Weil, La Pesanteur et la grâce*

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This book is dedicated to Daniel Colucciello Barber. His intellectual creativity and insights are only matched by the loyalty and care he shows in friendship. Everything I have written feels indelibly marked by his thought, and even where we may differ it nonetheless feels like grace: a grace without any hope of achievement.

Abbreviations of Works by François Laruelle

- AB *Anti-Badiou: On the Introduction of Maoism into Philosophy*
APP *Au-delà du principe de pouvoir*
BHO *Une Biographie de l'homme ordinaire. Des autorités et des minorités*
DE *Le Déclin de l'écriture*
DNP *Dictionary of Non-Philosophy*
EE *Éthique de l'étranger. Du crime contre l'humanité*
EU *En tant qu'Un. La "non-philosophie" expliquée aux philosophes*
FC *Future Christ: A Lesson in Heresy*
GS *Introduction aux sciences génériques*
GTV *General Theory of Victims*
IP *Intellectuals and Power: The Insurrection of the Victim*
ITD *"Is Thinking Democratic? Or, How to Introduce Theory into Democracy"*
MNP *Mystique non-philosophique à l'usage des contemporains*
MT *Machines textuelles. Déconstruction et libido d'écriture*
NH *Nietzsche contre Heidegger. Thèses pour une politique nietzschéenne*
NM *Introduction to Non-Marxism*
PD *Philosophies of Difference: A Critical Introduction to Non-Philosophy*
PF *Photo-Fiction, a Non-Standard Aesthetics*
PhNP *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*
PNP *Principles of Non-Philosophy*
PNS *Philosophie non-standard. Générique, quantique, philo-fiction*
SU *Struggle and Utopia at the End Times of Philosophy*

- TE *Théorie des étrangers. Science des hommes, démocratie, non-psychoanalyse*
- TI *Théorie des identités. Fractalité généralisée et philosophie artificielle*

Introduction: What Is to Be Done with Philosophy?

A certain desire for the end is endemic to twentieth-century philosophy. This is true of both the so-called Continental and analytic varieties. That end may take the form of the end of philosophy itself as it diffuses into a thousand other scientific disciplines claiming to be able to answer the old questions more concretely. Or that end may only be the end of metaphysics or history, the end of phenomenology, the end of language, or the death of God or Man, just the small death of the author – one may even look forward to the grand death of everything in the solar catastrophe, or perhaps one simply wants to be done with judgment. It seems that most philosophers want something in the end, while perhaps most readers just want to be done. “Are we done?” This is perhaps a familiar question at the end of an introduction to philosophy lecture by some bored undergraduate forced to take it as part of their core courses. Setting aside the source, the question remains in the desire of so many philosophers: are we done with philosophy?

The question arises because philosophy is in the midst of an identity crisis. This is nothing particularly new. If we go back, all the way back to the beginning of institutionalized philosophy in Plato’s Academy, then we might read his acceptance of the impossibility of a philosopher-king at the helm of an ideal republic after the death of Dion of Syracuse as the first major crisis of philosophy.¹ For the identity crisis of philosophy is a crisis over the point of philosophy and the ability of philosophy to affect the so-called “real world.” For Laruelle, philosophy desires to affect the Real itself, and it cannot because the Real is always already indifferent

to it. Since philosophy cannot affect the Real it desires to affect, it must then settle for second-best, which is affecting the world, just as Plato settles for advising the new rulers of Syracuse after the death of Dion. And yet philosophy cannot even live up to second-best.

The non-philosophy of François Laruelle suggests that this is the wrong question to ask: it is a false question. Bergson defined this kind of question as being one that leads us to a false answer. The true question is not “Are we done with philosophy?”, but “What is to be done with philosophy?”²

This book explores the answer to this question that Laruelle provides in his non-philosophy. The point of non-philosophy is not a different philosophical analysis of the traditional materials that philosophy has tended to dominate, but a mutation or recoding of the machinery of philosophy itself in order to create a new practice of thought. Non-Philosophy is not simply a “new philosophy.”³ It does not add yet another voice to interminable debates, but at its best aims for something different, something strange and alien to standard philosophy. Non-Philosophy is stranger than philosophy. And this hitherto untold strangeness lies behind the two-fold purpose of this book. The first part of the book provides a generic introduction to non-philosophy, tracing its most general structures. In this part of the book, the reader will be introduced to the fundamental inquiry into the essence of philosophy that Laruelle’s method of “dualysis” constitutes. In Chapter 1, I explicate Laruelle’s theory and analysis of what he calls the “Philosophical Decision.” This is a constant theme throughout Laruelle’s oeuvre, though most clearly laid out in *Philosophies of Difference* (1986, and 2010 in English translation) and *Principles of Non-Philosophy* (1996, and 2013 in English translation). The theory of the Philosophical Decision requires that we also investigate Laruelle’s theory of the One, which allows Philosophical Decision to emerge from the background noise of philosophical machinery acting upon various fields. Chapter 2 turns to the methods employed by Laruelle to mutate and make a new use out of the Philosophical Decision. Laruelle himself calls these methods a “style” and “syntax” and so this chapter surveys and explains this style and syntax. It explains the sometimes mystifying aspects of Laruelle’s written style as part and parcel of the practice of non-philosophy, as his syntax is constructed in such a way as to address philosophy’s underlying self-sufficiency. Therefore the intentionally difficult syntax aims not at confusion but at a reorganization of thought itself. Part I of the text

gives the reader a synthetic view of non-philosophy that prepares them for the specificity of Laruelle's engagement with the other materials that populate Part II of the book.

Part II is organized into five chapters to evoke the five waves of non-philosophy. These waves are Laruelle's own division of his work into five distinct periods that remain largely consistent over time, but with new materials and focus in each period. However, I do not present here a simple history of non-philosophy, as I have elsewhere presented such a history by focusing on either the change in axioms that guide each wave or the history of the conjugation of science and philosophy.⁴ Instead I have picked five significant thematics running throughout each of the five waves and show how these thematics are engaged with from his early work to his most contemporary, and in turn how they help to develop the practice of non-philosophy.

I have chosen this structure in part to address a criticism by Ray Brassier, one of the early Anglophone readers of Laruelle and translator of some of his essays. It was Brassier's work, alongside John Ó Maoilearca's, that introduced me to non-philosophy. And while I have learned a great deal from both of them, it was a certain annoyance (philosophy does not only begin in wonder!) at the criticism Brassier makes in *Nihil Unbound* that spurred me to undertake this book in this particular way. He claims that Laruelle's work is always focused simply on the machinery of non-philosophy, writing:

one cannot but be struck by the formalism and the paucity of detail in his handling of these topics, which seems cursory even in comparison with orthodox philosophical treatments of the same themes. Indeed, the brunt of the conceptual labour in these confrontations with ethics, Marxism, and mysticism is devoted to refining or fine-tuning his own non-philosophical machinery, while actual engagement with the specifics of the subject matter is confined to discussions of more or less arbitrarily selected philosophemes on the topic in question. The results are texts in which descriptions of the workings of Laruelle's non-philosophical apparatus continue to occupy centre-stage while the philosophical material which is ostensibly the focus of analysis is relegated to a perfunctory supporting role.... Thus in his book on ethics (*Éthique de l'étranger*) Laruelle does not actually provide anything like a substantive conceptual analysis of ethical tropes in contemporary philosophy; he simply uses potted versions of Plato, Kant, and Levinas to sketch what a non-philosophical theory of 'the ethical' would look like. Similarly, in his

Introduction to Non-Marxism he does not actually engage in an analysis of Marxist theory and practice; he simply uses two idiosyncratic philosophical readings of Marx, those of Althusser and Henry, as the basis for outlining what a non-philosophical theory of Marxism would look like.⁵

It appears that, for Brassier, non-philosophy has not delivered on any of its perceived promises. He even states in his characteristically harsh style that “Laruelle’s writings have yet to inspire anything beyond uncritical emulation or exasperated dismissal.”⁶ On this reading, non-philosophy would remain an ultimately fruitless bootstrapping that, aside from the machinery itself, offers nothing new to philosophy as such.

Brassier’s criticism hinges on what I see as a fundamental misunderstanding of Laruelle’s non-philosophy. He confuses the philosophical material that Laruelle pulls from standard philosophy with material that Laruelle aims to analyze. But Laruelle does not want to provide us with another philosophical analysis. Instead he wants to use the different philosophical analyses to do something with philosophy, without making any claim about the Real that conditions every theoretical project. To show how Laruelle does this, I engage with his corpus generically (or synthetically in the standard philosophical idiom) rather than linearly. This means that I do not present a developmental reading of non-philosophy. Laruelle himself says that such a reading of non-philosophy as a linear evolution would be artificial: “It is more a question of kaleidoscopic views, all similar yet rearranged each time... Each book in a sense reprises the same problems ‘from zero’, again throwing the dice or reshuffling the cards of science, philosophy, Marxism, gnosis, man as Stranger and Christ. The essence of non-philosophy would be, let’s say, fractal and fictioned.”⁷

This also means that I really do aim here at a general introduction to non-philosophy. While at times I mark certain differences in my understanding of non-philosophy from others who have engaged with Laruelle’s large body of work, this is not a book aiming to mark out a certain space or assuming major familiarity with the specific debates amongst Francophone and Anglophone non-philosophers. Instead, I firstly hope to help new readers of Laruelle to gain a foothold in his own texts, rather than this text alone, by explicating some of the main concepts and questions that non-philosophy engages with. I then turn to helping new readers situate non-philosophy in relation to some other debates in various

areas of philosophy and theory more generally, through creative readings of those concepts and questions alongside other forms of thought that I take to be radical. The radical nature of these other discourses is assessed on the basis of their incisiveness and rigor in their understanding of the world as well as their strangeness according to the norms of the standard model of philosophy and various forms of theory produced by that model.

I attempt to model the fractal nature of non-philosophy in the structure of the book. Fractals are complex patterns that remain self-similar across different scales. This means that ultimately there is a single overarching shape to the book that is found in each chapter. So, Part I of the text scales out to consider non-philosophy generally as a theory and practice. Chapter 1 presents Laruelle's theory of the Philosophical Decision, which is often taken to be the critical aspect of non-philosophy. Laruelle, however, presents this theory as a diagnostic of philosophy, an act of identifying what it is that makes philosophy in general. The purpose of this is not to destroy philosophy, but to disempower it so that it loses its self-sufficiency, or at least has its authoritarian impulses much weakened. Chapter 2 then turns to the style of non-philosophy. Here we look at the way non-philosophy works with philosophy as a material, the syntax it deploys, and some of the concepts that operate on philosophical material. If the theory of Philosophical Decision is the negative and critical move of non-philosophy, then its style is its constructive mode. The two ultimately cannot be separated since the negation of philosophy allows for philosophy to be used in the production or fabrication of new forms of theory.

After this general introduction to non-philosophy, we then move to Part II of the book in which we look at how it operates on the different scales imposed by specific domains of knowledge. We begin with politics in chapter 3, where we see an equivocation of politics and philosophy. Here we look at the way that politics and philosophy mirror one another in their decisional structure through an investigation of Laruelle's early works in political philosophy. We then turn to his later conception of a "democracy (of) thought" as the model that non-philosophy attempts to follow in thinking various theoretical materials together. This moves us from politics to science in chapter 4, since it is science that allows Laruelle to think otherwise than philosophically. Here we look at the way that science enacts a very different kind of relationship regarding the thinking of an object and the real object. We see here the beginnings of Laruelle's focus upon the human in the way in which he sees

science as a fundamentally humane form of thinking that blocks the possibility of presenting a singular essence of the human. This evocation of the human moves us then to the question of ethics in chapter 5. Here we investigate Laruelle's attempt to create a new kind of humanism, or non-humanism, by putting him in dialogue with important critical theorists on the question of race. This helps to elucidate Laruelle's thinking, but also puts him in dialogue with those outside of the mainstream of philosophy who are engaged in projects more like non-philosophy than those within the discipline of philosophy proper. Here we begin to see the importance of certain kinds of fictions in his theory as he develops the importance of names like "victim" and "stranger" for his ethical theory. And so, in chapter 6, we turn to his conception of philo-fiction to investigate further his theory of fiction and the ways in which non-philosophy acts as a kind of philo-fiction or "science-phiction." As we see there, this notion of philo-fiction speaks to the general shape of non-philosophy as it again posits a radically foreclosed Real-One untouched and unrepresentable by philosophy, but also posits that we may write stories regarding, that we may fabulate, rigorous fictions that speak to our unlearned knowledge about the radical immanence of this Real. This emphasis on fabulation or the fictive aspects of naming in non-philosophy opens us to a discussion of religion in chapter 7. Here we investigate the importance of messianism and mysticism to Laruelle's work, not as an escape from reality, but as human fictions that express demands regarding the salvation of human beings as well as the need for something beyond worldly forms of thought to think through what such a salvation would be. This connection of religion and science fiction through their fictive elements is made by Laruelle himself as he claims that religion, in the form of a gnosticism that runs throughout the institutional forms of religion, poses the same question as science fiction: "*should we save humanity? and What do we mean by humanity?*"⁸ I then conclude the book by examining what possible future there may be for non-philosophy. I do not argue that the future will be Laruellean or make any grandiose claims about the power of non-philosophy to change the world. As we may come to see in our living it, there is nothing particularly laudable about the future. Yet the future comes regardless, and it may be that non-philosophy offers tools for doing something with the future in the now.

I have my criticisms of Laruelle's project, but its supposed fruitlessness is not one of them.⁹ I have almost entirely left my criticisms

of Laruelle to the side, seeing my role in writing this introduction as being to balance the scales somewhat and present the strengths of Laruelle's project. To do so I have put Laruelle in creative dialogue with other thinkers, though not often ones in the mainstream of philosophy in either its Continental or analytic modes, as I have already said. From my limited perspective, analytic philosophy appears to still be conditioned largely by a hegemonic Liberal political project and is in many ways moribund as it works out increasingly self-referential and self-limiting problems. At the same time, Continental philosophy has largely continued to focus on explicating its own history or moving toward new forms of metaphysics. One could introduce Laruelle in this standard way, comparing him to this analytic philosopher or placing him in this Continental history.¹⁰ I could also simply give the facts regarding Laruelle's development; I could place him in his historical context (he was born in France in 1937 and has lived out most of his adult life in Paris), list his books (he has written over 25 books, with his first appearing in 1971), detail and assess his debates with Derrida, Luc Ferry (former French Minister for Youth, National Education, and Research), Badiou, and others. Such an approach has merits, but it does not show the power and potential of non-philosophy. Non-Philosophy provides resources for carrying out radically creative work that can take traditional tropes in standard philosophical discourse and combine them with exciting forms of thought taking place without regard for that tradition. In being stranger than philosophy, it allows one steeped in the history of philosophy to radically refuse the borders of philosophy and other forms of human knowledge. More importantly, it breaks down the frame imposed by that history of philosophy when considering questions of identity, universality, ethics, knowledge, science, faith, art, and other traditional themes of philosophy.

I have elsewhere tried to show how Laruelle's non-philosophy may help to dissolve certain problems in environmental philosophy and may fruitfully engage with the science of ecology. Philosophers often ignore ecology as a science, even if it has become somewhat in vogue to give attention to certain environmental issues or to borrow some concepts from the wider field of environmental studies – like the anthropocene. While the science of ecology may not have the cachet of neuroscience or cosmology, it is already doing rich philosophical work and the method of non-philosophy draws that out. That text, *A Non-Philosophical Theory of Nature*, does more to show the creative possibility for Laruelle's non-philosophy

of science (he calls this both a non-epistemology and a unified theory of science and philosophy) than does my chapter on science in this text. Instead, here I have tried to show the importance of science for the project of non-philosophy and how Laruelle in general understands the relationship, creating a kind of introduction that may be supplemented by my earlier text and Laruelle's own many books on the topic. In this book, I focus most on the overarching politico-ethical arc of non-philosophy, specifically by showing how Laruelle's project may join with the critical theory of race in an attempt to create a humanism made to the measure of the Human-in-Human rather than the measure of the world or a bleak cosmos.¹¹ These fields are not normally respected by institutional philosophers, and undoubtedly many of the thinkers referenced alongside of Laruelle are unconcerned about the proliferation and reproduction of institutional philosophy. Insofar as institutional philosophy fails to respect these fields and thinkers, it does so because those thinkers dare to consider problems that are much harder to think through than an Anglo-pessimism I regard as cheap in its talk of a cold world or the ultimate heat death of the universe. We are here, fragile creatures that we are, and, regardless of any future death, that fact of existing matters in both the physical and moral sense, regardless of how finite or limited that mattering is.

The two-fold purpose of this book really flows from one underlying drive: to show what can be done with non-philosophy and let that doing speak for itself. Many readers have come to Laruelle and felt exasperated at the strangeness of it, overwhelmed by how painful it was to work through the texts. And, for all that pain, what does the reader get? Detractors and even early adaptors have sat in judgment upon Laruelle's project and ruled it fruitless. I embrace Laruelle's fruitlessness, unlike these detractors, as a kind of anti-natalism regarding philosophy (though likely not an anti-natalism regarding human beings), precisely because it may join with projects on the fringes of institutional philosophy and theory more generally. I have no desire to have this judgment overturned on appeal – no desire for a debate on whether or not Laruelle's non-philosophy is truly fruitful. Like many works and methods of theory, it has already gone forth and multiplied in ways unrecognizable to philosophy's reproductive regime. Thought always multiplies. Only a naturalist version of theodicy – a "naturdicy" or "biodicy" – would look to the number of intellectual offspring or to successful grant applications in order to declare that this truly is the best of all possible intellectual worlds. Intellectual brilliance

is fragile and it dies and passes from the earth. Perhaps it does so everyday with every lost language and every doctoral graduate who remains unemployed.

One of the reasons I was first drawn to Laruelle's non-philosophy was precisely because of its rejection of theodicy in every form, even those that persist after the death of God. So to those who sat in judgment, not only of Laruelle but of those who have tried to take up the method and project it in their own way, I can only respond, "You say so" (Matt 27:11).¹² That non-philosophy is *philosophically* fruitless is indeed the good news proclaimed here. As this is not a book of mystagogy, at least not in any straightforwardly derogatory sense, the drive behind it is to show the ways in which non-philosophy allows us to enter into traditional or standard philosophical material and do something with it. For better or for worse, we are not done with philosophy, but we may be able to do something with it. For, however fragile and finite that doing is, it will always be real.