Questions for Ray Brassier

The questions that follow are gathered from meetings, readings, discussions, and private study of and around your work. They are questions 'for' you as well as a reflection of the philosophical problems that have circulated between the members of our group this past fall and spring. We have crudely placed the cuts in our conceptual field such that a sequence is formed, from epistemology to normativity, from ethics to politics, and back to the question of abstraction. We don't all hold fast to this ordering and so within each section traces of the others are inscribed. As such, some repetitions were inevitable. An overarching theme can be discerned as the tangled heritage of the Enlightenment, as well as a series of discussions around what we take your recent call to arms 'Seize the Means of Semantic Production!' to possibly entail. We hope that these questions can shape the occasion for an elaboration of specific parts of your work, for a discussion of its philosophical presuppositions and, if we're lucky, some other trajectory coming out of all that. There is no obligation for you to respond to every point raised here, nor to do so in the order in which they arrive.

1) Appearance, Reality and the Transcendental Gyre

Let us start with the notion of 'transcendental torsion', the way in which a mind represents a world of which it is a part. One way in which you approached this torsion is by insisting on the necessity of positing the distinction between appearance and reality. This would relate to the 'torsion' in that it makes a difference to thinking for it to posit this distinction. However, it seems as if - and we think here in particular of the 'Deleveling' piece - that the appearance/reality distinction is asserted on two levels: the empirical and the transcendental. Otherwise put, it is characterised both as a distinction concerning represented facts (as the difference between the true and the false) and as a formal distinction between representing and represented, sensing and sensed, thinking and thought. And, it seems, these two operative 'levels' of the distinction are not to be identified. The question of how the difference between these levels is meant to be demarcated is complex, and, it seems, undecided. In the last instance, is the difference between the empirical and the transcendental level of the appearance/reality distinction to be arbitrated formally, or empirically?

1a) We can develop this by pursuing a related question with regards to 'the formal', by which we here refer to mathematics and logic, or more generally, axiomatic formal systems. We would like to single out these disciplines in order to intensify the point at stake. To whit: given that the appearance/reality distinction is transcendental (=formal) for all knowledge, is there also an appearance/reality distinction operative internal to 'the formal', internal to mathematics and logic as historical disciplines? And how could we characterise such an 'internal' distinction? For 'mathematical platonism' the answer is relatively simple: there is, in the history of mathematics, a progressive approximation of pre-existent or transcendent mathematical 'forms'. Given, however, Sellars' and Brandom's antipathy to platonic realism, it seems that any epistemological perspective even 'nominally' allied with inferentialism as an epistemological program will be opposed in principle to such formal transcendence.

An alternative perspective would be to think this through Frege's famous distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, especially as it has been recently theorised by Danielle Macbeth. We could characterise Macbeth's Fregean answer to this question as follows: even internal to mathematics or logic, we must distinguish between conceptions and concepts. This is to say that Macbeth historicises Frege by insisting that mathematical concepts are always mediated through a historically situated 'language', even if formalised, that expresses the concept in an intelligible form. Such historically situated expressions are inferentially articulated conceptions, amenable to being objectively presented as senses (*Sinn*) in formal language, in order to investigate the putative concepts which are their reference (*Bedeutung*). Thus, for example, although 'we' factually cannot even imagine the failure of the law of identity (a=a), this is because of its ineliminability within our logical language, our system of conceptions, and there is no *a priori* reason that 'future beings' might not have a reason to assert the failure of this law in a different logical language, corresponding to a transformed understanding of the concept 'identity'. The history of mathematics is thus characterised as the progressive formal clarification of conceptions and their 'inferential content', but it is essential that at no point do we identify conception and concept (c.f. Macbeth, *Frege's Logic*, pp.152-155). Implicit in this account is the possible historically anterior dissolution of what once 'appeared' as an irrecusable, *a priori* law, a perspective that is essential to Macbeth's assertion that logic is a 'science like any other'. In *a posteriori* empirical science we might theorise an analogous case as one in which a shift in theoretical frame 'made a difference' to both empirical observation and the interpretation of observables. Formal disciplines such as mathematics complicate this picture, because their 'matter' is in some sense *a priori* through and through. In the case of mathematics and logic, the model of asymptotic or approximative approach to some refractively understood underlying 'process' seems misplaced, as is illustrated by the fact that Macbeth's attempt to develop Frege's project in line with the demands of historical mediation still relies on imparting some degree of constitutive formal transcendence to mathematical concepts.

In summary then, posing the appearance/reality distinction with regards to these disciplines seems to summon again the spectre of mathematical platonism within the inferentialist body. This problematic - most narrowly one concerning the specificity of mathematics as a discipline - becomes all the more pressing insofar as we are working with an operative identification of the transcendental and the formal. Does this problematic extend from the epistemology of mathematics to the ontology of *a priori* entities, and further to ontological work as such, which outflanks the transcendental boundaries? How are we to establish a distinction between the formal and the transcendental that does not smuggle in ontological requirements, either positive or negative, through the guise of a constitutively ambiguous notion of the formal?

1b) Following from this point, we might ask: how fixed or mutable is the transcendental framework? For example, although no object can be known outside the forms of intuition of space and time, the conceptual understanding of space and time have been radically altered by modern science (a point that Sellars emphasises, *pace* Kant). Does a change in our conceptualisation of the categories impact the transcendental framework, or is it always the case that the former is structured by the latter? Or, if we understand the transcendental

framework as the condition of possibility for thinking some object, to take a concrete example, we might think of the development of computation as the condition of possibility for understanding thought in the context of cognitive science and artificial intelligence. Is this too liberal an understanding? Perhaps what is needed is to specify several nested levels of conditioning—the individual level of perception and cognition conditioning the agent's empirical perspective, the collective level in which this is embedded (social, historical, economic, normative-linguistic, formal, technological), and the transcendental structure proper. What constitutes a transformation of the transcendental framework, and what are the criteria for adjudicating whether such a change has occurred? Indeed, can any such 'criteria' be given?

1c) We will close this section by returning to the idea of 'transcendental torsion', which can perhaps be reposited as one side of a potential opposition between Sellars' version of 'transcendental naturalism' and a thread of 'naturalised transcendentalism' extractable from the work of Schelling. It seems as if you follow Sellars' lead in emphasising the importance of transcendental philosophy conceived as a philosophy that takes seriously the necessity of representation as following from thought's recognition that it is a part of the world it is trying to think. This would be a primary site of our 'torsion'. In both cases, transcendental philosophy is conceptualised as a result of the suspension between rationalist and empiricist wagers leading to the following conundrum: my mind cannot directly grasp the world, nor can I adequately understand the world from what I sense of it. Sellars' transcendental naturalism, which, like Kant's, invests strongly in normativity, attempts to resolve the conundrum as follows: if my mind can only indirectly read the world through representations I construct from my own capacities in tandem with the sensory information I collect, the information I 'collect' is only possible after I have been adequately (conceptually) trained to do so, cautious of the framework of givenness. This is why the idea of 'transcendental torsion' is proper to it: the transcendental, *qua* the conceptual conditions of experience, undergoes a torsion as it is understood to be a 'part' of nature, the experience of which it structures.

In contrast, on this latter point naturalised transcendentalism would respond: I can only adequately understand the 'what' I sense from the world by examining how the world deploys what I sense in it. The caveat here would be that the world determines what I can know of it, and how, even before conceptual training is possible. So here we could more properly speak of a 'natural torsion', wherein nature undergoes a torsion during the genesis of experience, which it transcendentally structures.

In sum, the position of transcendental naturalism would appear to decide the normative/non-normative split from the side of the normative, while naturalised transcendentalism would seem to do it from the side of the non-normative. We could also split this in terms of how one interprets the transcendental stance as a form of cognitive opacity (i.e. 'not knowing my own thoughts because of how thinking works' or 'because what thinks in me is outside of me'), or as different perspectives of a possibly unified project based upon whether the form of nature is read as world to be investigated or as ground. Our question: are these positions contradictory, or is it 'merely' a methodological question? Is it possible to cauterise the enquiry in this way, such that what we have characterised as the decision whether to start from the transcendental or the natural torsion would rest as methodological, without entailing either implicit or explicit metaphysical consequences? Is it rather necessary to insist—as

we ultimately read Schelling's conclusions—on a sort of 'torsion of torsions', a double gyre traversing the transcendental and the natural? Finally, how does this bear upon the possible project for a 'stereoscopic' vision of the manifest and scientific images, and the tension therein between methodological dualism and/or ontological fusion?

2) Churches, Universities, Courtrooms

2a) In contemporary rationalist philosophy, and in your work in particular, the idea of theology comes with a mostly negative signification. One must abandon classically understood theology, whether as an illegitimate extension of the powers of reason (as critiqued by Kant), or as negative theology with its fascination by ignorance and enigma. If the former is exemplified in Thomas Aquinas's 'theological' mode of thinking (together with that of his contemporaries and successors, e.g. Richard Swindburne) and the latter in what has been called the 'post-secular turn in the humanities', for example in the works of Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion, we might call these respectively the theological versions of rationalism and scepticism. The rejection of what we can identify as two distinct strands gathered under the term 'theology', on the grounds of their regressive or mystifying character, does not, however, exclude a third alternative. Considering the (at the very least) latent theological contents of terms like 'teleology' and 'eschatology', it would seem that there might be a place for analysis and critique of so called 'theological' concepts in the rationalist project you are engaged with.

One vector of this form of critique is of course what we find in the tradition of 'political theology' exemplified in different ways by Carl Schmitt, Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. Here, the axiological categories inherent to political thinking are understood as irreducible to their expression within a purely normative perspective, and can therefore be subjected to conceptual inquiry for which political theology provides valuable critical tools. An example of this critical mode is the manner in which Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval analyse neoliberalism's weaponisation of the category of personal freedom, as it emerges from the Augustinian conception of man's state of sin in *La nouvelle raison du monde* (2010). We are aware of the profound ways in which you would differ from such thinkers with regards to methodology and philosophical orientation and yet it seems to us that it might be fruitful to draw questions from this field to address the character of the normative and normativity in your work. This type of analysis seems to retain both a practical and a theoretical import and we might not want to throw these critical tools out with the post-secular holy water.

Assuming that there might be some relevance to this mode of critique for your rationalist programme, let us focus on the particular relation between the pragmatist line which you have been engaged with over the last years and the institution of the normative. We see this in Carl Schmitt's critique of neo-Kantian normativism (as exemplified by Kelsen) in his *Political Theology* (1922): Schmitt conceptualises the necessary institution of the normative order insofar as it requires both stability and an understanding of normality to function, as well as a specific space of suspension of the normative order (as epitomised by the state of exception). This points to the question of whether the normative must be regarded as grounded in a form of irrational decision which renders it partly heteronomous. In oth-

er words, is the space of (political) reason to be understood as self-sufficient or even self-grounded, or established as the production of its own autonomy from a perpetual state of heteronomy to the factual? If the latter is the case, how consistent would such a conditional autonomy of reason be? Does the force of norms not always require a founding forcing of norms?

It is essentially a concern for the relation between ideas of rule-boundedness and of emancipation that causes us to push this line of inquiry. In Agamben's work on monastic forms of life (*The Highest Poverty* [2011]) for instance, he interrogates an archetype of a form of social existence that, in a marginal setting within Christian society, was constituted on the basis of a rule-based life that sees its agent as both freely determined and devoid of personal interest, thus providing us with an admittedly contentious exemplar of a community that is organised around the identification of spontaneous life and obedience to a freely-adopted, as opposed to inherited, set of rules. Without drawing too tenuous an analogy with the ideal of an 'inferentialist communist community', how would a tentative Promethean politics aim at producing, through its appeal to a 'reason fuelled by imagination', a conception of the relationship between freedom and rule-boundedness that does not collapse the one into the other?

2b) Following from this question concerning the institution of norms, we would equally like to address what could be called the 'tribunal of reason' as an imagined arena of 'giving and asking for reasons'. In part, our worry here concerns the degree to which Brandom's 'Hegelian step beyond Kant' relies on an excessively jurisprudential reading of Hegel. In the 'Deleveling' essay, there is a passage on the meaning of 'cognitive progress' phrased in terms of 'naturalizing Hegel's account of the spiral of absolute knowing'. Cognitive progress is said to consist in the integration of knowledge about the structure of representing acts into represented content. That is, progress occurs when the 'transcendental framework' is taken as an object of knowledge, thereby altering it. As you put it there, the incorporation of more and more facts about representing into represented facts is what constitutes cognitive progress. Are we to consider the process of altering the transcendental framework to be in some sense equivalent to what it would mean to 'seize the means of semantic production' and perhaps even to positively work in the direction of 'progress'?

We might then ask a question with regards to this by way of an example. The concept of race is no longer recognised as a scientific concept, which we could consider to be a good thing, both on scientific grounds—since it does not designate a significant margin of difference at the genetic level, making it in a sense obsolete—and on political grounds, as the removal of a purported scientific justification for oppression. Would this have happened purely on the grounds of 'giving and asking for reasons'? The difficulty points in two directions. First, it can be argued that the removal of race as a scientific category didn't happen on purely 'scientific' grounds. Second, the fact that it ceased to be accepted as scientific didn't stop it from functioning socially. We might offer this as a paradigm for the fraught question of the relation between social and scientific 'progress', so that the problem of race in its historical and present context gives us the occasion to ask whether the 'seizing' of the means of semantic production is in the end a question of reason or of force, or, in terms of our earlier considerations, formal or empirical? This refers back to Schmitt insofar as it is a question of the

norm-force relation: if there is to be 'a tribunal of reason', must we first institute a court-room? A further example can illustrate this.

When Antènor Firmin was invited to visit the Society of Anthropology of Paris it was on the condition that he himself would not speak. Several of the papers presented there asserted the incapacity of the black man to reason, or even think, drawing authority for their claims from Joseph Arthur de Gobineau's infamous work of 'scientific racism', *On the Inequality of the Human Races* (1855). Firmin himself went on to publish *On the Equality of the Human Races* (1885), a work that, although it retains the concept of race, argues vehemently against the 'scientific' character not only of Gobineau's works but of the anthropologies of Kant and Hegel looming in the background. It certainly constituted an entry into the game of 'giving and asking for reasons'. But, and this is our point, effectively the work went unheard. Insofar as this was due to the subject position from which entrance into the 'game' was attempted, it may serve as a useful limit-case where the 'object of science' itself expresses the network of oppression within which the production of an arena where claims to reason can be mediated has always been located. We wish to move towards a structural problem with regards to the jurisprudential image of reasoning constructed across the dual images of the laboratory and the courtroom, which we have indexed with the name 'Tribunal'. The problem of institution seems clear here, especially in light of pronouncements such as Brandom's that '[o]ur moral worth is our dignity as potential contributors to the Conversation' (*Perspectives on Pragmatism* 2011, p. 152). From where and on what grounds does 'the Conversation' commence?

3) Experience, Imagination, Myth

3a) For this third line of questioning, we would like to start by focusing on the status of self and subject in your framework. You have in the past drawn on Metzinger's concept of 'nemocentrism' to argue for the obliteration of the self and its phenomenal experience in favor of a rational or 'communist subjectivity'. You seem to identify two dimensions of selfhood: first, a naturalistically-described self, as projection of internal and external representations, and second, a normative agent, a 'physical entity gripped by concepts' ('The View from Nowhere', 2011). We wonder not so much about subjectivity's being left epistemically void (despite phenomenological protestations to the contrary), as about its not being given any task at all. If subjects trying to understand themselves can, at most, be inscribed as a further projection and fusion of a naturalistic self with a rational agent, as sense-making individuals working through the manifest image, insofar as the rational project of self-understanding relies on the capacity of something to both reconceptualise its descriptive framework and engage in a set of communal practices, we see a question left over here as to the status of this quasi-real subject. You describe this as the involution of objectivity and subjectivity at the site of an agent initiating an act. This schema of 'primitive involution' thus concerns act and subject in a way that seems to make the two indistinguishable. We think we recognise here the same chiral figure involving nature and thought and conceptual and non-conceptual experience, which leaves us with the question of whether the subject is really eliminable as a concept even within the kind of framework provided by Metzinger.

3b) From there, we would like to turn our sights to the relation between reason and imagination. In your piece on 'Prometheanism' (2014), you conclude with a call to remake the limits of the imagination, and stage a drama between sentimentality, imagination and reason—with 'sentimentality' seemingly condemned as a quibbling dogmatics of lived experience opposed to any progressive instrumentalisation—and ultimately conclude in favour of a new compact between reason and the imaginary capable of overcoming such sentimentalism. We consider the implicit dismissal of lived experience as sentimental to be problematic. Rather than a counter-polemic to your polemical stance on the epistemological regressiveness of sentimentality, we are concerned with what seems to be an under-theorised split between a bad and a workable form of appeal to experience. After all, if experience has been dispelled, what form of imagination would there be left to remake?

As a case study from among the later heirs of British modernism, we can locate a development of the concept of imagination as a form of quasi-inferentialist poetics in the work of J.H. Prynne. Prynne locates the initial 'matter' to be worked over in the imagination in those characteristic structures of personhood, of national linguistic 'mental wiring' and 'cradle speech', which constitute the experiential content to be taken up and transformed in the imagination. While acknowledging the almost fundamentally regressive character of such lived structures, Prynne's wager is that the practice of poetry can leverage the fact that '[a]ll this wiring is also, of course, the site and motive for a vigilant resistance, for non-compliance: using a set of implements does not mean being used by them' ('Mental Ears and Poetic Work', 2009, 127). However, such practice would *prima facie* seem condemned to a dangerous 'isolation of a self-interior retrospect', an 'encroaching narcissism of preoccupation', if poetic discourse were not maintained as a vector for increasingly autonomous levels of improvised conceptual formation:

> To think conceptually thus requires some element of higher-order mental purpose, even by implication, to order the process of thought by attention to its relations even more than to its constituent factual data. [...] [T]his can allow, for example, the deployment of descriptive or observational data not as validated *sui generis* representation but as evidential or illustrative or by analogy or example, where what is construed or interpreted or elaborated expressively will take precedence over the raw materials and what might otherwise be the rules for valid procedures in regard to such first-order knowledge. [...] These higher 'free' levels of poetic contrivance have been described as already self-conceptualised, in part because of language as mediating code practice or even code structure. But it is possible to consider the most ambitious forms of poetical invention to be those that enter into their own conceptual domain so completely as to transform this into it's own free 'naturalism', where all is conceptualised and therefore nothing is, a 'possible world' where abstraction functions not as that which is abstracted from something else but as autonomous at levels of second-order meaning or interpretation; this meta-discourse practice is fully supported by the language medium because natural language itself is

generically conceptualised in relation to 'what there is', whether 'real' or not, elastic in upward dimensionality, almost indefinitely so; and this is especially true of poetic discourse constructions. Within such territory, often separated from lower levels by ascription as 'in imagination' or 'sublime', an arbitrary text-lexicon can be converted into a distinct vocabulary, and improvised rules for following a narrative or performance can be formed by modification of lower-order practice, or can be newly invented in their own right.

Concepts and Conception in Poetry (2014), pp. 13-15

We cite this passage at length because we believe that it might point towards a rationalist approach to the imagination, wherein it is allowed its own logic of abstraction on par with autonomous reason. Its application here however is within the realm of (lyric) poetic production—where lived experience has long appeared 'intrinsic to the fabric of conceptual thinking and purpose'—rather than action or cognition. If then a relation is to be made evident between reason and imagination outside of poetic discourse, what stops us being left with a conceptual apparatus of 'second-order abstraction' unmoored from any actualisation in terms of experience and subjectivity, a duopoly of reason-imagination which, like Averroes' Active Intellect, operates so autonomously that it might be regarded as making the thinkers who participate in it into nothing if not the most passive of subjects? If it is true that it is neither satisfactory to place the imagination exclusively on the side of experience *nor* of 'autonomous' reason, how would you articulate the relation experience— imagination— reason as one obtaining between these three distinct terms?

3c) From here, we can attempt to deal with the status of lived experience in the inferentialist project. In Sellarsian terms, experience as such is conceptual, whilst 'lived experience' is non-conceptual and hence non-communicable, to all intents and purposes a fiction. It is in this sense that you are able to deploy inferentialism as a theoretical frame to castigate the critical abdication implied by the recent theoretical reification of lived experience as a privileged epistemic vector. It seems that for you 'lived experience' names literally nothing amenable to theoretical reflection, and its deployment as a phantom within theory is ideology masked as radicalism. Yet, as we follow the consequences of this position, we see ourselves moving into murkier waters concerning the splitting between conceptual and non-conceptual experience, approaching a problematic to some degree structurally analogous to the one we indexed earlier concerning the transcendental torsion and the Schelling-inspired notion of natural torsion. From the transcendental side, so to speak, the division is clear: conceptualisation—and hence communal transmissibility—is what makes the articulation of experience possible, and furthermore it structures that very experience. From the experience side, however, there appears to be a non-conceptual core that serves as a motor to conceptualisation. For all that lived experience is a determined determination, it must also be legible at the very least as a point of symptomatic manifestation of the dominant normativity to be overcome. If what we would wish for from the inferentialist perspective is an account of the transformation of experience *by* reason or, more modestly, the experience *of* reason, does

this require reconceiving the division between conceptual and non-conceptual experience as it operates in inferentialist analysis? The 'rise' from experience to abstraction is one of the crucial themes of this analysis. If we consider especially that experience provides no foundational epistemological ground, we would expect the 'return' also to assume some import. In what way does the modification of higher-order abstraction feed back into lower-order practice?

3d) In continuity with Enlightenment tradition, we can say that inferentialism posits a negative concept of experience which shares in the properties of myth. Where myth posits an originary identity of name and essence ('the divine names of things'), reason operates as the demystifying agent that demonstrates the tautegorical character of experience, and thereby proves the possibility of its transformation. We would argue that the same tradition also posits an internal, functional myth of reason, i.e. Prometheanism: we don't know what reason is able to do, and therefore reason is (epistemically) unbound, a power which cannot be *a priori* limited by anything external to it, such as human experience. In the claim that reason is as reason does, we see a mythical structure that remains intact even after being appended with the tautegorical caveat of self-revisability. Indeed, if reason can only define itself through its self-differentiation from experience construed as that which needs to be endlessly revised, thus constituting itself as that which has a boundless revising power, then it is perhaps revisability that is the focal point of reason's mythical structure, such that this would require adequate clarification in order to produce a fully reflexive concept of reason.

As we see it, there are two prominent ways of attempting to conceive of such a reflexivity, and each carries with it an attendant mythic structure. The first would be Kantian, wherein the revisability of reason is a regulative idea, which is nothing if not a posited coincidence of name and thing, a myth. The second would be to conceive of reason as a power *in* the world. But the mythic structure here seems to lie in a quasi-ontologisation of reason as a mythological operation collapsing idea and cause. Is the latter what a fully-fledged Prometheanism would lead us towards? If that is not the case, what else could a viable mythology of reason look like?

4) Negative Teleology

4a) Another name for the following line of inquiry might have been 'what does it mean to win?'. This question, which suitably sharpens the focus of political thinking in contrast to vague gestures towards 'post-capitalism', can be approached through those of negation and rational progress. Firstly, in terms of the trajectory of your work, we have traced therein what appears as a move away from a 'mere' materialist eschatology of extinction, an 'abstract negation' perhaps, and towards what could be called a determinate negation of the present. In this context, you have mobilised a transcendental distinction between tactics and strategy to counter Nick Land's affirmation of the machinic teleology of Capital. Such a distinction seems central to how we might formulate a political program for the destitution of class society. But if we consider global conditions of real subsumption to be a given, is it even possible to think such a program, short of the annihilation of ourselves in and through the self-destruction or self-depletion of capital?

From the perspective of subjectivation, the position of *Nihil Unbound* seems to still be mirrored in your recent piece 'Refusal', which radically pits 'despair' against 'hope'. But another line is argued for in 'Wandering Abstraction' (2014) where you challenge the 'paradox of self-cancellation', and tentatively mark out some form of 'accelerationism' appended with an adequate account of the relation between cognitive function and social practice. In this context, there would be a partial rejection of an earlier form of negative utopianism—or, indeed, '*transcendental miserablism*'—in which the sole political goal would be the relinquishment of all hope on the part of the living, the effacement of all 'pre-figurative' images of the future, that is, the abolition of determinate political goals as such. In the development from abstract to determinate negation, the case still appears undecided between a virulent form of nihilism and a programmatic politics. If, as we believe, subjectivation is the focal point of this indecision, what form could a nihilist political subject take? What does it mean for a subject to inoculate themselves with nihilism?

4b) If we presume that the case can indeed be made for the articulation of strategy qua purposive teleological end, then this presumption inherently brings with it the question of how and by which mechanism a strategy might become regulative for practice. Does it not, to a certain degree, require something like an account of the political 'will'?

We might pose this as a question concerning freedom in the Kantian sense of the autonomy of reason's capacity to self-legislate, which in turn will allow us to frame it within your more recent readings of Brandom. One advantage brought by his work is the mediation of this classical sense of autonomy with the irreducibly social constitution of reason, such that rational truth procedures are socially embedded without however reducing social norms to 'attitudes' that are historically or causally explainable. Nonetheless, in this picture rational norms are obliged to conform to or even maintain the historical continuity of those procedures, which apparently lends a conservative or even reactionary character to Brandom's program. A program that, if taken to the letter, ironically terminates in a kind of sublimated reenactment of Kant's own ratiocinations as to the impossibility of 'rationally' justifying the revolutionary upheaval of reason's own social ground. You have characterised this as Brandom's lamentable 'reformism'. But isn't the point more fundamental than this? The deeper problem is that even if we don't go so far as to speak of 'revolution'—which might always be to some degree 'unjustified'—Brandom's picture of reason leaves essentially no space for inscribing a cut in what is. If we want to hold onto a conception of rationality as 'rule-following' but avoid the pitfall of construing rationality or freedom as merely the capacity to obey and revise (revise by obeying) existing social norms, will we not then have to mount a more fundamental challenge to the inferentialist picture of knowledge than Brandom will allow for? The idea of developing a pragmatist self-understanding of reason is surely not just to make it explicit but to change it. It is at this point that Badiou or some other position adherent to 'evental' rationalism (e.g. Meillassoux's messianism) could be called upon to affirm the power of reason in and through rupture with the present. However, the Bachelardian/Althusserian lineage of the epistemological cut which Badiou draws upon on this point would seem to be opposed tout court to the inferentialist picture of rationality, in science as much as in politics. How indeed could these positions possibly be mediated? Put in other

terms, does the question of purposiveness point to a deep irreconcilability between the 'evental' and 'juridical' figures of the subject?

4c) To return to the relation between *Nihil Unbound* and your current projects, we venture a synthesis: the insistence on the scientific 'fact' of extinction functions as empirical 'negative' teleology. Thus the thinking/being gap is opened up by the inscription of a future empirical event, one which would be the factual 'end' of normativity, in the literal sense of terminus. Paradoxically, this empirical inscription of the terminus of normativity is thus used as a lever to reactivate the legitimacy of teleological thinking in the present. But the teleological 'norms'—qua regulative ideas—which are reactivated in this movement are not identifiable with the empirical end foretold. Rather, they are orientated towards a practical reformation of the social. In this latter case, you seem to support teleological vectors that are not only aligned with the 'interests' of thinking (as in the earlier case of extinction) but touch upon a teleology of the subject. What then is the relation between these two 'levels' of teleology, the empirical level and the transcendental level?

5) Abstraction and Science

5a) Following on from this last point about connecting empirical and transcendental 'ends', what is the broader relationship you posit between the scientific and the normative? We might formulate this as a question about 'hooking up' the truth of science and the truth of politics. Two sites where we can locate predecessors here would be the respective projects of Althusser and Badiou.

In Althusser's work there was an attempt—to various degrees speculative—to project historical materialism as a Science of the study of socio-historical formations. In contrast, there seems to be, in your work, a nascent relationship or allegiance between politics and empirical science (with a small 's'). Notwithstanding the fact that the status of both Science/science and the respective objects of study in Althusser appear markedly different from yours, how do you relate to the Althusserian-derived project—as sketched in *Sur la philosophie* (1994)—of 'saving' Science/science from its bourgeois ideological deployments, through a form of 'class struggle within theory'?

Such a theoretical attempt could be said to be one of the core traits of 'critical theory' in the broadest sense. In the work of Althusser and his collaborators, a particular emphasis has been put on the development of an epistemology that could live up to the imperatives that are proper to critical theory so conceived. In your own project now, one finds various attempts at formulating such a critical epistemology, in part through Sellars' 'metalinguistic nominalism'. How does this project diverge from the ends of Althusserian 'conjunctural' epistemological intervention?

Turning to Badiou, in particular his later 'post-Althusserian' mode, we can locate a certain dialectical reversal of these questions. In the first issue of Collapse (2006), you and Robin Mackay directed a question towards Badiou concerning, amongst other things, the status of his conception of science with relation to the empirical sciences, and neuroscience in particular. His answer was of a typically polemical valence: neuroscience is little more

than the modern clothing of phrenology, and in any case, the 'scientific' study of intelligence and cognition would never be of any philosophical import given that 'truth' is neither of the order of cognition nor of judgement: 'Since every truth is in-human, we can hardly hope to understand its genesis by poking around in the neurons of our brains!' Putting aside questions we might ask as to Badiou's good faith with regards to his proclamations on 'the current state of research in cognitive science', there is a kernel in this response which we wish to pursue. Namely, are there situations or questions on which there is a philosophical or methodological imperative to diverge from certain declarations of scientific 'fact'? To invert your own phrasing, might there be cases where the interests of thinking do not coincide with those of science? This territory seems to be especially acute for you given the edict in *Nihil Unbound* that we ought to 'put philosophy and science on an equal footing before the real'. Given your recent critiques of the naively eliminativist rhetoric of that book, in light of a more developed engagement with Sellars' work, would you still hold to this demand in its most extreme consequence?

As a final tranche of this line of questioning, we ask, in light of this Sellarsian critique of 'pure' scientistic eliminativism, if the Sellarsian strategy deployed in order to bolster an anti-reductionist position is our strongest ally, and whether we could not consider the structuralist insistence on the autonomy of the symbolic as a different—and perhaps opposed—strategy for securing the 'normative' as a similarly autonomous area of philosophical investigation?

5b) From this explicit address to 'science', we can turn to the related question of 'abstraction', which we perceive as a consistent concern in your work. Recently, you have theorised this through a potential re-appropriation of the work of Sohn-Rethel and his concept of real abstraction. However, it seems difficult to extract a concept of real abstraction from Sohn-Rethel's mould in a manner amenable to the kind of epistemological project that you advocate, given that Sohn-Rethel developed this concept precisely to criticise epistemology as formal abstraction, which is to say that epistemology is in fact subsumed by capitalism and will always reach an aporia that can only be resolved on the practical level. Positive, 'scientific' epistemology, on Sohn-Rethel's analysis, is always going to be ideological, because it thinks that it can solve problems that are outside of it. Can we develop a concept of real abstraction which, to reference the subtitle of *Intellectual and Manual Labour* (1970), is no longer cordoned within the boundaries of the 'critique of epistemology'? Is it even coherent to speak of an 'epistemological' conception of real abstraction, given that Sohn-Rethel's critique would be that real abstraction is precisely the site of what is epistemologically intractable?

5c) With regards to this territory of science and abstraction, and their putative alignment with political ends, it seems as if we are circling around a renovation of something resembling 'scientific socialism'. Putting aside Engels' part of this project, a less examined but related historical trajectory is something which we might call the 'Marxist legacy of the Vienna Circle'. These thinkers, in various ways, affirmed the connection between logical empiricism as a scientific and philosophical methodology and a socialist political project. Often, this was orientated around some form of the ideal of—to quote Carus' gloss on Carnap—

'explication as enlightenment'. It seems to us as if your recent notion of 'seizing the means of semantic production' closely links up with this current (particularly in Catarina Dutilh-Novaes recent reading, see 'Carnapian Explication, Formalisms As Cognitive Tools, and the Paradox of Adequate Formalization', 2017). To what degree is the Sellarsian project you affirm an attempt to re-actualise this line of thinking as a trajectory mediating the politics-science pair?