

The pathos of finitude: Ordinariness, solitude, and individuality in non-philosophy

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"When [Michel] Foucault speaks of the 'death of Man' at the end of *The Order of Things*," remarks Béatrice Han-Pile, "he is not heralding some kind of mass extinction."¹ Indeed, Foucault is not predicting the end of the human being, the decline of the word "man" as a descriptor for human beings in general, or even the demise of the unitary, autonomous ego as the presumed center of all human experience; rather, in a very narrow sense, he is heralding the death of man's figuration as an *empirico-transcendental doublet*. This specular doublet, which for Foucault is a defining feature of post-Kantian philosophy and the human sciences, locates both knowledge and its conditions within a single ambivalent figure: "man" appears as an empirical entity able to grasp, within "himself," the conditions of his own knowledge; an amphibological being determined by natural laws but also able to elude these laws by reflecting upon their conditions of possibility. A simultaneously *ordinary* and *extraordinary* being, bounded by and yet able to go beyond his own finitude.

Foucault claims to dimly perceive the incipient reappearance of a long-lost unity of language, viewing this return as a sign "that man is in the process of perishing as the being of language continues to shine ever brighter upon our horizon."² But this can be nothing more than a wager, Foucault's refusal to supply any causal explanation for epistemic rupture meaning he cannot verify such a rupture is presently taking place. He merely hopes that the possibility of posing such affirmations "may well open the way to a future thought," for "man is neither the oldest nor the most persistent problem that has been posed for human knowledge."³ By contrast, as François Laruelle sees it, man *is* in fact the oldest and most persistent problem for human knowledge, or at least for the Western intellectual tradition: "philosophy has never known the real subject, it has never known man."⁴

Laruelle does not place any bets on the death of man, arguing that the tendency to "celebrate the death and overcoming, and then return, of man" is not peculiar to the Foucauldian archaeology of knowledge but actually a recurrent philosophical trope.⁵ He wishes to instead dislodge the *real* man (who English speakers nowadays would probably prefer to call the real person or individual), who he identifies with the abstract concept of "the One," from the sphere of humanism, anthropology, and philosophy, all of which fail to think man in his [*sic*] essence.⁶ Philosophy, Laruelle argues, "is a way of thinking that reduces all phenomena to a combination of two mutually related parameters: Unity and Scission or Identity and Difference."⁷ The empirico-transcendental doublet is thus, for him, not a uniquely post-Kantian figuration, but merely one expression of an invariant proclivity within the philosophical interpellation of man. Instead of approaching man from the perspective of philosophy's preexisting rules, injunctions, and techniques, Laruelle wishes to set out from man himself in his singular essence, establishing a rigorous science that claims to be, from the outset, *a priori* sufficient to this singularity.

Whereas the philosopher "conscripts man into service for their own very peculiar goals and values," Laruelle institutes a transcendental science that, he argues, enables one to think man in his essence, on his own terms – and in doing so, to think, on the one hand, man apart from the various appearances philosophy has projected on to him and the uses to which it has put him, and on the other, philosophy from the perspective of man himself.⁸ This is what Laruelle describes as a science of *ordinary man*. Finite, solitary, and entirely without qualities, drawing "an inalienable essence from himself," this so-called ordinary man denotes the radical immanence of the individual we all are prior to our inevitable philosophical interpellation.⁹ Rather than looking to broaden philosophy's horizon, incorporating those aspects of daily life and conventional language it ignores or marginalizes, Laruelle tries to wrest ordinary lived experience from philosophy's grip, in the hopes of finally severing the empirico-transcendental doublet to which philosophy has constricted it.

In this article, I examine Laruelle's unusual conception of ordinariness in more depth, looking at how he seeks to undermine the aforementioned doublet through a purely transcendental science, defined by a resolute formalism and rejection of all empirical, figural, and representational content.¹⁰ I argue that Laruelle's fondness for the concept of "man" (acting as a descriptor for "the One") and his attendant preoccupation with subjective finitude points toward an aspect of his project not straightforwardly explicable on its own terms: namely, his desire to guide the reader, who he presumes to be already ensconced in the debates and jargon of academic philosophy and its surrounding milieu, toward a certain subject position. At the same time that Laruelle enjoins us to recognize a fundamentally "ordinary" core of ourselves – a passive, powerless subject who does not participate in the world furnished and represented by philosophy – he also formulates a "science" of such ordinary individuals that is, in both its means and ends, seemingly at odds with such an interpretation, inducting its initiates into an ethos of continual inner labor and productivity, maintaining a "strong but tolerant indifference to philosophy" through ongoing work on and modification of its discursive materials.¹¹ Ultimately, I suggest, for all of non-philosophy's sizeable merits, it is more fruitful to view philosophy (including non-philosophy, a distinctive *détournement* of continental philosophy's conceptual and methodological riches) as constituting a discursive corpus that does not have some especial purchase on the real, but interpellates audiences and draws distinctions, including that of ordinariness and its inverse, in variegated ways.

Ordinariness and everydayness in contemporary thought

In the context of contemporary philosophy, mention of ordinariness and its vindication will probably conjure up thoughts of "ordinary language philosophy," which finds its roots in the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein – who rejected the notion that philosophizing demands a manner of speaking distinct from the ordinary use of language – and was initially developed at Oxford in the post-war period, principally through the work of Gilbert Ryle and J.L. Austin. It might also remind one of Walter Benjamin's investigations into the objects and routines of bourgeois urban life, Martin Heidegger's emphasis upon the everydayness of our existence, Henri Lefebvre's attempt to remedy philosophy's habitual devaluation of regular life, Jürgen Habermas' interest in the formal structures that constitute everyday communicative practices, or Michel de Certeau's heterological studies regarding the practice of daily life, foregrounding the outwardly insignificant tactics individuals and groups use within determinate situations in defiance of abstract strategies of domination. In diverse ways, all these approaches look to rectify the perception that philosophy is unconcerned with or actively hostile to ordinary moments of human existence and ordinary ways of speaking, that it positions itself as in some way *extraordinary*.

The work of De Certeau – who dedicates his best-known book, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1974 [1984]), to "the ordinary man" – would come to play a crucial role, alongside Roland Barthes' semiological readings of the minutiae of French daily life, in the development of the English-language cultural studies tradition (first in Great Britain, then in the United States, Australia, and elsewhere), as Raymond Williams' qualified affirmation of an organic, and above all "ordinary" English working class culture (a "popular" culture, in the traditional sense of the phrase) opposed to both bourgeois "high" culture, typified by the Leavisite curriculum's "great tradition," and a deracinated "mass" culture, was gradually displaced by a more generalized affirmation of daily, minor acts of resistance, especially in the realm of media consumption.¹² This discipline's "concern with the experiential dimension of everyday life" and "understanding of culture as a site of contestation," as John Frow and Meaghan Morris expound, found its expression in an obsession with popular, everyday, and mundane forms of culture.¹³

Although the development of cultural studies clearly forms part of what Simon During describes as "the ongoing European philosophization of the humanities," relying heavily on the importation of ideas and frameworks from continental philosophers, it did not play out on a strictly philosophic terrain, emerging primarily out of English literature departments, and its preoccupation with the everyday often led to it being situated in diametric opposition to philosophy.¹⁴ "Whereas philosophy has traditionally

aspired to discover perennial and transcendent truths,” writes Rita Felski, “cultural studies emphasizes the social embeddedness of human activity and the importance of group identities formed around such categories as class, gender, race, sexuality, age, and ethnicity.”¹⁵ Far more than its philosophical forebears, cultural studies introduced a feminist dimension into analyses of the quotidian, stressing “the extraordinary ways in which we can use our ordinary selves,” as Elspeth Probyn puts it, or doing justice “to variability and precariousness in the ways in which gender identities [...] are constructed in the practices of everyday life in which media consumption is subsumed,” as Ien Ang likewise describes.¹⁶ Crucially, emphasizes John Hartley, cultural studies’ preoccupation with everyday life was intended to be *critical* in outlook, “a kind of intervention analysis, dedicated neither to the improvement of everyday activities themselves, nor to appreciation of cultural pursuits, but to critique of the society of which these activities were both symptom and stage.”¹⁷

This very notion of *critique* is now largely taken for granted within universities, having become, more than anything else, an instrumentalized posture by which the scholar justifies their own relevance in the face of budget cuts, institutional pressures, and a systematic devaluing of the humanities. The outlook Hartley gestures toward, however, whereby the practices of everyday life are neither endorsed nor condemned, but viewed from a dispassionate, self-reflexive position as a result of which their conditions become appreciable, is not just self-evident, but has a very particular history, grounded in the fraught relationship between philosophy and ordinairiness. In order to better appreciate this history, we need to go back several centuries earlier, to the concept of “critique” articulated by Immanuel Kant, whose analytic of finitude attempts to cleanly divide empirical knowledge from transcendental reflection, turning attention toward the formal *conditions* of cognition. The effect of this split is to divide “man” between two distinct forms of cognition: one ordinary, the other speculative.

Of course, presentation of human beings’ cognition as divided in some fashion is a perennial feature of philosophy. But this division traditionally occurs along lines of truth and falsity, tearing humans between a sensible or worldly existence mired in ignorance and a higher knowledge to which only the philosopher can provide access. Kant, whose critique concentrates on the sources and boundaries of knowledge rather than the nature of the real in itself, instead relies upon a distinction between ordinary (i.e. empirical) and transcendental cognition. This is in no way a distinction between truth and its obverse; instead, it separates the normal, everyday experience in which *a posteriori* knowledge (the kind we associate with the natural sciences) is acquired from a specialized mode of reflective thought by which the *a priori* conditions of this knowledge can be grasped. Importantly, the latter is a specifically philosophical stance, the historical absence of which has not hindered progress in other sciences. The “duty of philosophy,” in Kant’s estimation, “is to abolish the semblance arising from misinterpretation, even if many prized and beloved delusions have to be destroyed in the process,” and this can only take place by bringing reason to bear upon itself, independent of all experience, through this philosophical mode of comportment.¹⁸

Kant’s self-styled disciple J.G. Fichte makes this latter point even clearer, arguing that one either “views the sensible world from the standpoint of ordinary consciousness, which one can also call the standpoint of natural science, or else one views it from the transcendental standpoint.”¹⁹ This distinction is not identical to the one Kant draws – for Fichte, the former standpoint views the world in terms of people and things possessing an independent existence, such that they would remain even in the subject’s absence, whilst the latter views these same objects as constituted by the subject’s consciousness – but it sustains the notion that the philosopher has a higher, speculative way of thinking at their disposal, allowing them to reflect upon the conditions of ordinary consciousness. This standpoint does not enable them to transcend their everyday existence (and supplies no reason why they should want to do so) but imparts the means of grasping its condition. Between Kant and Fichte then, a peculiar sense of the ordinary is established, which will continue to echo throughout many later philosophers’ work: namely, as not inherently untruthful, but not properly philosophical either.

This post-Kantian distinction between ordinary and philosophical standpoints exemplifies the empirico-transcendental doublet described earlier: “man” is posited as a being capable of reflecting upon

his own ordinary experience and through this reflection able gain insight into the (non-empirical) conditions of this experience that remain unthought within its confines, establishing the formal boundaries of all possible knowledge (for Kant) or locating the origins of such knowledge (for Fichte), and ultimately permitting him to realize a freedom unimpeded by empirical determination. Man is thus figured as an ambivalent, amphibological being, a *homo duplex* torn between his empirical nature and the latent transcendental faculties of his reason, whose divided nature can only be reconciled through the ongoing inner labor of a genuinely critical philosophy.²⁰

Anthropo-logical difference

It is precisely this figuration of man as *homo duplex* that Laruelle, one of the most interesting thinkers of recent years, seeks to undermine. In *The Minority Principle* [*Le principe de minorité*] (1981), he declares it imperative “to exorcise what a modern would call the ‘empirico-transcendental doublet’”.²¹ He does this by appealing to a transcendental truth that “enjoys an absolute autonomy in relation to ‘scientific’ or ‘moral’ truth,” a truth located in the “pre-ontological and pre-logical transcendental seeds” that he refers to as *absolute dispersions*.²² Enigmatic even by Laruelle’s usual standards, this book sets out the rudiments of his project to come, attempting to conceive of the individual (and by association, the multiplicity), otherwise known as “the One,” in its most radical manifestation, starting from these individuals themselves (the aforementioned dispersions), rather than thinking them in relation to one or more universals – which is to say, trying to think the originary givenness of the individual, with no concern for determination, individuation, or becoming.

But the stakes of such a reconfiguration of the transcendental method remain unclear and the nature of these absolute dispersions elusive. Hence the importance of Laruelle next book, *Biography of Ordinary Man* (1985 [2018]), wherein the individual in question comes to be identified with what he terms the “ordinary man.”²³ This motif is not always Laruelle’s focal point. But the notion of a defense of the human individual, in their irreducible singularity, against the hallucinations of philosophy and other human sciences – the question, as Rocco Gangle puts it, of “how ordinary human beings tend to be denigrated by authoritarian structures in and of the world with both implicit and explicit philosophical legitimisation” – keeps rearing its head throughout his oeuvre.²⁴ Maybe, Laruelle proposes in *Theory of Strangers* [*Theorie des Étrangers*] (1995), “it would be fruitful, after so many systems based on the ‘individual,’ the ‘subject,’ ‘Dasein,’ ‘flesh,’ and so on, to return to the former name of ‘man’.”²⁵ To do this, he continues, is “to force oneself to respect human identity against the techno-philosophical obsession with dividing him up and the horizon of anthropological difference in which the Human Sciences still take shelter.”²⁶

Laruelle holds this *anthropo-logical difference* to be an invariant characteristic of Western philosophy’s relationship to man, “a phantasmatic projection of Greco-Christian ontological prejudices onto real man.”²⁷ Philosophy posits man “masked and falsified,” as a divided and doubled being, separated from himself, split between an empirically determined, worldly, or vulgar subjectivity and a universal exteriority, an inhuman or superhuman transcendence, the philosopher furnishing the means for not only grasping the latter above and beyond any given man’s quotidian existence, but grasping the reciprocally determinative relationship between these divided aspects.²⁸ “The essence of the individual,” Laruelle bemoans, “has remained unthought by philosophy [...] denying the conditions of his real experience through the multiplicity of authoritarian universals that it uses to filter him.”²⁹ Their essence is misrepresented as an expression of difference, a manifestation of philosophical *decision* – the viciously circular structures and operations to which the real is subjected by philosophy.³⁰

There are several implications of this anthropo-logical difference worth noting. First, that philosophy “does not know man except through representations of man,” incapable of thinking him as anything other than a shifting set of false figures.³¹ The proclaimed death of man is thus nothing more than a conflation of man’s fate with philosophy’s perpetual irresolution. Second, that this empirico-transcendental parallelism (or its variations: empirico-ideal, empirico-rational, empirico-metaphysical, etc.) does not belong exclusively to post-Kantian philosophy and the human sciences but is in fact a

constituent element of philosophy tout court. Lastly, that it is fundamentally implicated in the "forgetting of the real or 'finite' essence of man" – which is to say, the forgetting of the "ordinary" man, who does not represent yet another mutation in the figure of man, but who has, in effect, always been there, preceding any such figuration.³² It is this "man" upon whom Laruelle focuses his attention: man, in his real essence, distinct from the world (which he may well contemplate but to which he will never belong) and utterly indifferent to the projections, presuppositions, and teleologies of both philosophy and the human sciences (which can only ever posit the possibility of man as such, never his reality). Ordinary man as the real itself, as the absolute that remains utterly indeterminable by philosophy. "A finite or ordinary subject, who, not needing philosophy, has never entered philosophy and does not intend to leave it."³³

Figuration and abstraction

In an interview with literary scholar Jean-Didier Wagneur, one of four contained in his book *As One* [*En tant qu'un*] (1991), Laruelle expounds upon the use of the expression "biography of ordinary man" – a description of man's interpellation as a divided being, beholden to various authoritarian universals:

The term "biography" is rare or even nonexistent in philosophy. I have used it to contrast myself against what feels to me like a certain traditional philosophical contempt for man. Here, "Biography" designates the most fundamental, essential events that shape an individual or through which an individual necessarily passes, not in order to become an individual but quite simply in order to continue to be.³⁴

Non-philosophy's appeal to ordinarity here brings to mind the aforementioned ordinary language philosophy – in particular, the later work of Stanley Cavell and his followers, which was, writes Sandra Laugier, a reaction to "the (de)negation of our ordinary language and our ordinary lives, in the philosophical conceit that it can surpass them, correct them, and simply know them."³⁵ After all, both are defined in large part by a distinction drawn between philosophical discourse and ordinary existence, with ordinary language philosophy aiming, as Cavell puts it, for "a view of words free of philosophical preoccupation."³⁶ And Cavell's interest in philosophers' proneness to "shun the autobiographical" in favor of a mode of address imbued with necessity and universality would seem, outwardly, to parallel Laruelle's employment of a biographic motif in describing the ordinary man's existence.³⁷ One would be mistaken, however, in seeing more than a superficial likeness between these two perspectives.

Laruelle himself alludes once in a while to this "English-language usage" of the concept of the ordinary, "a usage partially directed against philosophy."³⁸ But he makes clear that he still deems it philosophical in its character, even if it is a markedly malleable and self-critical variant. Ordinary language philosophy, explains Cavell, arises in opposition to "the logician's wish to translate out those messy, non-formal features of ordinary language," rejecting the positivist representation of a systematic, formalized, and idealized philosophical language in comparison to which the semantic ambiguities and opacities of everyday language use could only be regarded as misleading or nonsensical.³⁹ Such an approach though, argues Laruelle, does not do away with logicism as such, but only "certain inferior and conspicuous forms" – the most blatantly idealizing or anti-empiricist – with the result that the ordinary language philosopher actually ends up coming to the aid of the *logos* by "detaching language from formal logic," finding themselves in a long tradition of philosophers who have tried to preserve their discipline's remit by denouncing its more pronounced authoritarian features.⁴⁰

So what exactly does Laruelle mean when he speaks of the "ordinary" man? For him, ordinarity is synonymous with radical finitude: the ordinary man is an individual *qua* individual. He is not an ideal abstraction derived from empirical experience, but the real, singular identity of the individual: a *homo simplex*, undivided, foreclosed to any empirical determination and indifferent to any historical, social, and cultural characterization.⁴¹ "Man thinks, acts, or stipulates from within himself, with his own thought," not needing any help from something or someone other than himself.⁴² Laruelle thus strengthens, rather than dissolves, the distinction between the philosophical on one hand and the ordinary on the other. Castigatory of the "powerlessness and nihilism" of contemporary philosophy,

which has increasingly prioritized concepts such as difference and becoming as a means of loosening and widening its categorial schemas (without ever actually overturning the formal structure within which these schemas are constructed), Laruelle wants nothing to do with such philosophy's attempted rapprochement with quotidian existence.⁴³ Instead, as Andrew Sackin-Poll observes, non-philosophy "introduces the idea that the ordinary, in the end, resists and does not submit to the order of philosophy," and that "philosophy submits, ultimately, to the ordinary — that is, the fugitive, indeterminate movements of the everyday."⁴⁴

One might object, of course, that this is just apophaticism. Laruelle insists, however, that he is supplying a positive definition of ordinary man, who "is not a residual and shifting figure of philosophy or the Greek episteme, but rather is determined before these and absolutely precedes the philosophical calculation of predicates."⁴⁵ Man's ordinairiness does not signify the remnants left behind after philosophy's determinations have been subtracted; quite the contrary, for it involves a total absence of the externalities or occasional causes by which man, in his philosophical guise, conventionally comes to be defined. Ordinary man is entirely sufficient in himself. He does not lack anything. He is faceless and solitary. He does not need to venture out beyond himself, into the world, and he is certainly not *in-the-World*, even if he is still able to contemplate it. He is not alienated, needing to somehow reconcile his divided being, become what he truly is, or need to seek answers outside himself. He is not social, communicative, or gregarious. He does not need anything to help him know, understand, or reflect upon himself. "Precisely because he is 'ordinary,' man does not fall under the determinations of knowledge."⁴⁶ He knows himself immediately and unreflectively as *real*.

"But being devoid of predicates," Laruelle clarifies, "does not mean that he is devoid of essence."⁴⁷ Indeed, Laruelle frequently, and somewhat unfashionably, refers to the ordinary man's inalienable essence, which is not taken from some prefabricated category (be it philosophical, anthropological, historical, biological, bureaucratic, etc.), but is drawn immediately from himself. His essence "is defined by characteristics that are absolutely original, primitive, internal, and without equivalents in the World," signifying the minimal condition for him to be thinkable *qua* individual.⁴⁸ Equally unfashionably, Laruelle's non-philosophy is premised upon an explicit dualism, counterposing ordinary man against the world and its attributes, to which he is condemned but will always remain a stranger. A dualism pitting *minorities* (ordinary men) against the worldly *authorities* that impose these attributes. Laruelle's stated aim is "to tear absolute science, the science of the real, from the philosopher and give it to he who has not asked for it: ordinary man," establishing a rigorous, non-empirical science of individuals.⁴⁹ A transcendental science, in other words, but not as we usually know it.

Whilst the specifics of how such a transcendental science is effected shift over the course of his work, Laruelle's concern with expurgating the transcendental method of its lingering empirical elements stays consistent. The *strictly* transcendental perspective, as he comes to define it, is not a mode of reflection gazing upon empirical experience, trying to describe the latter's *a priori* conditions or structures; rather, it *is* experience itself – namely, ordinary man's lived experience. It describes, in other words, the power of man's thought unadulterated by any empirical trappings, drawn only from his own finite immanence, performing operations upon philosophical materials and the world they claim to furnish without ever being implicated in them. And this expurgation of all such empirical vestiges is patently visible in the very manner in which Laruelle presents his non-philosophical system, the abstraction and intrication of which is striking. It is certainly not biographical in any recognizable sense.

Laruelle, remarks Ray Brassier, "may well be the first European philosopher in whose work substantive innovation has been wholeheartedly sacrificed in the name of total formal invention."⁵⁰ He offers no contributions to epistemology, ontology, ethics, aesthetics, politics, history, communication, or any other areas of traditional philosophical interest. He gives no propositions, examples, or case studies, furnishing only transcendental *theorems* that "describe phenomena lived by ordinary man, phenomena that are invisible to philosophy and its phenomenology as a matter of principle."⁵¹ The result is an intimidating formalism, which retains a certain recognizable, albeit shifting terminology borrowed from various philosophers (Plotinus, Kant, Fichte, Husserl, the Neo-Kantians, Heidegger, Levinas, Henry,

Althusser, Derrida, and Deleuze being particular favorites) but does away entirely with the pretension that his work might tell us anything about the nature of things, about what we can know, how we ought to act, or on what basis we form judgements. By tackling philosophical materials in purely formal terms, Laruelle attempts to reveal the constrictive implications of philosophy's structure of *decision*, which enables the continual fabrication of putatively novel concepts and systems all conforming to a single basic pattern, and of its presumed *sufficiency*, its claim to legislate over and speak for the real (and thus for the ordinary man):

philosophy is not just a set of categories and objects, syntaxes and experiences or operations of decision and position: it is animated and traversed by a faith or belief in itself as in absolute reality, by an intentionality or reference to the real which it claims to describe and even constitute.⁵²

Whilst this formalism might seem at odds with Laruelle's emphasis upon *ordinariness* – which, he boldly claims, enables him to “describe the essence of any possible man” – for non-philosophy, it is only through such abstraction that we can momentarily loosen the yoke of philosophy's manifold interpellations, thinking from our own singular finitude in a manner unrecognizable to these hegemonic modes of thought and unassimilable into any kind of universal category.⁵³ *Ordinariness* comes to represent, more than anything else, an individuality and solitude – a radical immanence – that cannot be defined on the basis of external terms and extrapolated out beyond itself. If the task of ordinary language philosophy, as Laugier puts it, is “to bring us back to ourselves – to bring our words back from their metaphysical use to their everyday use, or to bring conceptual knowledge of the world back to a knowledge of or proximity to ourselves,” this still presumes us to be fundamentally social, communicative beings, whose essence is defined by the words we use to express ourselves and the knowledge we gain of ourselves and our world.⁵⁴ The purpose of non-philosophy, in contrast, is to bring us back to a solitary mode of thought, comprising nothing but the lonely individual. A biography of ordinary man is equally “a biography of the solitary man”.⁵⁵

The vestiges of empiricism

In order to maintain this strictly transcendental point of view, Laruelle argues, “we must distinguish the genuine empirico-transcendental duality from the empiricist-transcendental doublet” – that is, we must separate a transcendental, non-philosophical mode of thought which deals with philosophical materials on its own terms, in a purely formal and unilateral fashion, from manifold empirico-transcendental or empirico-ideal mixtures in which these terms come to be reciprocally determinative.⁵⁶ And Laruelle himself is, in the context of his own published writings and interviews, very skilful in this exact maneuver, refusing to allow his theorems to be contaminated by empirical examples. Faced with the choice that, Paul de Man once argued, all philosophy seems to come up against, between having to either “to give up its own constitutive claim to rigor in order to come to terms with the figurality of its language” or “free itself from figuration altogether,” Laruelle leaves no doubt that he has chosen the latter path, making remarkably little recourse to metaphors, analogies, tropes, or any other kind of figural expression.⁵⁷ A truly individual thought “gives up concrete representations, representation in all its forms” and “defines the essence of individual multiplicities in such a way as to exclude any figuration whatsoever.”⁵⁸ It involves a “postural and subjective experience of thought from the outset freed from the constraints of the World, from the codes of philosophy, from the norms of transcendent exteriority, from the rules of speculative figuration or the speculative imagination,” the notion of *posture* in this description explicitly distinguished from “the *figurative*, but also the *figural*, *relational* and *positional*,” being “the necessary kernel of reality that precedes them absolutely.”⁵⁹ We have already seen just how much of the traditional philosophical schema he is willing to jettison in order to achieve this formalism.

And Laruelle's non-philosophical project has, in turn, proven itself quite successful in resisting academic arrogance. In France, though his work has precipitated many theses and monographs written in a non-philosophical style, these tend to replicate rather than ameliorate his own hermetic leanings.⁶⁰

And within an Anglophone context, whilst non-philosophy has made some inroads into the more speculative corners of continental philosophy, this has not really resulted in its assimilation into the broader canon of “theory.”⁶¹ Though one may be inclined to blame this on the stylistic abstruseness of his approach, a cursory glance at the texts produced by the predominant figures in the theoretical pantheon, especially from the (post-)structuralist and deconstructionist moment onward, would suggest that this has never really been a barrier to such assimilation. Indeed, the surmise that, as Chris Kraus once put it, “theory, because it’s difficult, must be serious,” still exerts influence over the various filtering mechanisms by which humanities scholars differentiate “theory” proper from ordinary, run-of-the-mill theories.⁶² Non-philosophy remains theoretically inassimilable for two basic reasons: first, because it does not offer discrete “concepts” that can be extracted from their original context and incorporated into an eclectic “toolbox”; and second, because its strict formalism and commitment to abstraction offers little room for “analysis” in any conventional sense, let alone the kinds of textual analysis that hold sway in the humanities.

One might still take exception to the claim that Laruelle’s work, in spite of its claimed “refusal of all empirico-ideal experience,” is actually able to escape the “enclosure of representation.”⁶³ Funnily enough, it is probably the very notion of the “ordinary man” that most conspicuously reveals mundane, “worldly” concerns bleeding into Laruelle’s formalism, introducing a contentious, gendered, historically- and linguistically-situated term into a theory which purports to think ordinary people without projecting any qualities on to them. Of course, Laruelle himself would respond that this term should not be taken as “descriptive” in the philosophical sense, as a signifier that in some way bears upon or constitutes the object it signifies; rather, it is a figure extracted from philosophical materials in order to be reworked, rendered sterile or inert, “an ‘abstract’ usage” of language “completely distinct from its transcendent or ‘figurative’ usage”.⁶⁴ The One becomes legible via the mediation of contingent discursive materials and the language they offer us, but this manipulation of language in the service of non-philosophical ends is premised upon “the absolute, unreflected precedence of the One or of the real over its description,” furnishing purely abstract axioms that point toward an immanent, human reality but make no claims to determining or constituting it.⁶⁵ This is not to say that the One is ineffable, but that “its description, which is completely possible, is indifferent for it or does not itself constitute it.”⁶⁶ And this in turn entails two demands: first, that “these descriptions must be multiplied and diversified in accordance with the thematics, whether *philosophical or otherwise*, that are available and chosen as material,” and second, that they must be invoked “provisionally, ‘against’ themselves and in view of making them describe the One’s autonomy, self-consistency and indifference to philosophy itself.”⁶⁷

In the most generous reading, then, the non-philosophical usage of the longstanding philosophical concept of “man” (which is considered outmoded in English but, along with the *masculin générique* in a wider sense, is still retained in most French writing), seeks to subvert rather than reproduce its false universalism: the word “man” functions as one of many monikers variously used to describe the One, serving to illustrate just how inadequate philosophy’s interpellation of its audience under this umbrella concept is to the lived singularity of human existence and just how indifferent we as individuals remain to such interpellation. Clarifications of this kind though are unlikely to reassure those who take umbrage at the centering of this semantically freighted term, whether because of its gendered character, its humanist connotations, or its historical baggage. In such cases, what is meant to be an entirely abstract axiom is likely to take on a rather concrete appearance. What might, at one time and in one context, seem like a bland, unproblematic descriptor – a commonplace term extracted from philosophy’s conceptual armature – can appear to suggest, at another time and in another context, fairly or unfairly, that non-philosophy has not entirely shaken off the exclusionary presuppositions and practices that have long underpinned so much academic philosophy.

It might also make one wonder why the immanence, finitude, and singularity for which Laruelle has spent so long trying to account must necessarily be indexed back to the individual *qua* human. For even whilst Laruelle stresses the importance of multiplying descriptors, he makes clear that a certain humanness nevertheless subsists in the One independent of any such description:

A text of non-philosophy is constructed around a word, a statement, a philosophical text: this guiding-term must stop functioning as a hierarchizing and ontological unity and not merely as a pole of thematic unification. This is only possible if it is described first as identical, only in the last instance, to a human essence or to a radical lived experience, as a being-immanent *extracted* from the World and even anterior to it.⁶⁸

In other words, whilst the terms used to express it might differ ("ordinary man" being only one example), the One's inherent humanness does not form part of these contingent descriptions to which it remains indifferent; rather, it is its axiomatic humanness that determines, in the last instance, this very indifference. Such humanness is equated with the singularity and finitude of individual experience, and vice versa – it is made abundantly clear that this individuality is that of the solitary, atomized person (as opposed to, say, that of a community or collectivity of some kind).⁶⁹ "This emphasis on 'man' and the 'human'," argues Ian James, "is both rather arbitrary and, indeed, highly problematic insofar as it appears to contradict Laruelle's own axioms of radical immanence."⁷⁰ It suggests that, from the outset, certain preconceived philosophical notions frame Laruelle's attempt to escape the strictures of philosophical discursivity.

The specter of philosophy

Laruelle frequently maintains he is not seeking to overturn philosophy, but instead instigate "a mutation of philosophy's syntax and of its experience of the real," preserving its conceptual heritage and value whilst utilizing its diverse, contingent materiality for other ends – namely, a science of ordinary men or individuals – unconstrained by the decisional structure.⁷¹ But whilst this science is not limited to working solely on philosophical materials (hence his later engagements with psychoanalysis, theology, photography, ecology, technological science, etc.), it does require materials that conform to said structure and its corresponding presumption of sufficiency.

As a result, this science of ordinary thought, which is supposed to be indifferent to philosophical determination, comes to be expressed in strikingly philosophic terms. Or to put it another way, this science, which is also supposed to be a rigorously scientific biography of ordinary man, supplying a "theoretically justified description of the life he leads," ends up describing this man in terms likely to resonate primarily with those readers who have already undergone inculcation and assimilation into the symbolic codes and logic of academic philosophy, with its watchwords, shibboleths, and revered proper names.⁷² The audience for non-philosophy is effectively circumscribed in advance, and thus this "description of the individual without qualities" tacitly speaks to a set of worldly individuals with quite specific, identifiable qualities.⁷³

Amongst us mere mortals, of course, communication is never universal – this is not a reasonable benchmark against which any text should be measured. It is always partial, contingent, contextual, and conceived with a particular audience in mind. Every philosopher (a category within which Laruelle includes himself) has their own terminology and syntax, their own means of transmitting their claims, likely appealing to some and off-putting to others. But Laruelle's peculiar use of philosophical materials calls attention to a fundamental ambiguity in his work, and especially in those books where the concept of "man" plays a prominent role: is the science of ordinary men a science *for* all people, or is it a science for philosophers and their ilk bent on demonstrating, or perhaps even convincing themselves, that they are not always shackled to the constraints of academic philosophy? Can this science really remain sufficient to a putative ordinarity when it is occasioned by quite specific materials conforming to a particular formal structure?

In the secondary literature on non-philosophy, much has been made of Laruelle's stylistic proclivities and the forbidding nature of his writings – "the difficulty of reading to which some people [...] still object in my work," as he puts it himself in one interview, "claiming I have hampered their cherished 'readability'."⁷⁴ But the question of philosophical communication involves more than just style or rhetoric, to the extent that the latter are concerned with appealing to or persuading an audience; it also

encompasses the more neglected question of who the philosopher imagines their audience to be, and by extension, who the reader, assuming we are dealing with written works, presumes the imagined audience to be. The determinative role played by considerations of audience in the development and articulation of philosophical arguments is rarely discussed, treated as accessory to the intellectual labor of philosophizing itself. As Régis Debray puts it:

an overly idealist view of the life of ideas comes to obscure the fact that a discursive milieu is constituted by forms of organization that are “materialized” but barely perceptible, even transparent to those whose logical discourse they structure. The presence of something implicitly shared (a community of insinuations) makes the conjunctive milieu prescriptive, through a natural, tacit agreement between members – the “it goes without saying” of those who always know what to say, when to say it, in what order, and in what place.⁷⁵

Non-philosophy is a perfect example of this unspoken agreement, circumscribing its audience through a set of shared terms, references, and stylistic norms.

After all, in spite of Laruelle’s antipathy toward philosophical discourse and “its spontaneous practices (those of philosophers, of everyone, within the university or elsewhere),” his work is nevertheless written for an audience versed in philosophy – more specifically, an audience who will recognize the concepts, methods, and turns of phrase peculiar to that practiced in the philosophy departments of French universities.⁷⁶ Indeed, in a much later lecture, delivered at an English university (which happened to have, at the time, one of the few philosophy departments in the country that dealt chiefly with continental philosophy), Laruelle would describe non-philosophers “inevitably, as subjects of the university, as is required by worldly life.”⁷⁷ Not that his writings necessarily garner favorable reception even from those who work in such departments (many scholars au fait with his influences seem to still find his writings baffling, if not actively obscurantist). But it is hard to shake the feeling that these works, in spite of their iconoclastic ambitions, are written with a quite limited audience in mind. We end up with an account of ordinary or “non-philosophical” thought that speaks mainly to professional philosophers and those in proximate academic disciplines.

Philosophy, argues Felski, “remains haunted by the ghost of its own past” as a master discipline, its long-ago abdicated position as queen of the sciences, “an aura that endows it with a lingering authority and prestige.”⁷⁸ And Laruelle is more than willing to capitalize on this aura at the same time he claims to subvert it. Proclamations announcing philosophy’s ongoing decline are a persistent motif within his writings. He complains that this discipline “finds itself lagging behind the arts and sciences,” having chosen to disregard any alternative directions that might have prevented it becoming “a conservative and repetitive activity.”⁷⁹ It contributes, we are told, to “the pain and anxiety, war and violence driving culture, language, and society.”⁸⁰ Laruelle habitually insists on philosophy’s totalizing power, its predominance over thought, in order to justify the task of delegitimizing it. He simultaneously dismisses philosophy as a reactionary symbol of decline, incapable of producing anything genuinely new, and elevates it to a position of supreme intellectual authority. After all, the suggestion that suspending Western ontological habits will open a “field of realities that have been absolutely hidden since the origin of philosophy,” finally breaking through millennia of decadence and stagnation induced by the philosophical paradigm’s dominance is only plausible if one already accepts that philosophy (in the decisional form by which Laruelle characterizes it) maintains such a chokehold over contemporary thought.⁸¹

And this suspension is not intended as a one-time occurrence; rather, it is an ongoing project, a “labor of thought” that defines “a *philosophically impossible yet complexly real usage*” of philosophical materials, the evolving nature of which is reflected in Laruelle’s self-periodization of his own voluminous output.⁸² Despite Laruelle’s ambition of getting beyond the interminable commentary and textual production characteristic of academic philosophy, his writing is often accused of being needlessly repetitive, rehearsing the same formulas over and over again with only subtle variations. In part, this is a consequence of the resolute absence of examples, case studies, and any kind of overtly empirical

content, leaving only an abstract framework from which his method is derived. But it is also because, in the absence of said content (which remains, in any case, non-philosophically inadmissible), non-philosophy's role – even if it cannot actually express it in these terms – becomes primarily about inducting its readers into a certain ethos, a certain way of thinking, and most importantly, a certain posture *vis-à-vis* the philosophical texts they encounter. It demands continual work from its audience, recapitulating that which occurs in Laruelle's texts themselves.

"The performative nature of non-philosophy," suggests James, is decisive in Laruelle's work, "because it is ultimately the sole guarantor of the 'non' of non-philosophy (that is, its distinctness from philosophy itself)."⁸³ Where the typical philosopher will likely try to persuade their audience (through methodological rigor, conceptual precision, explicative clarity, rhetorical extravagance or whatever else) that they possess some kind of truth, the means for accessing this truth, or, in some cases, a means for undermining the very notion of truth, Laruelle instead tries to persuade them that his approach, despite appearances, is not beholden to the structure of philosophical decision and does not make any misplaced claims to a sufficiency over the real. His readers must recognize the concepts he invokes, but also be convinced that the context of their invocation has radically shifted, far removed from the ways in which philosophers are inclined to deploy them. The non-philosophical corpus, then, could be described as an ongoing labor of abstraction on the part of the author, a never-ending act of loosening the shackles of philosophy, mutating philosophy's wealth of concepts, methods, and frameworks in order to gesture toward the One, the ordinary individual within all of us, without ever exhausting its infinite possibilities for further description. Yet another addition to what Cavell describes as the "trail of images" philosophers have left us "of themselves preparing for philosophy or recovering from it."⁸⁴ An ongoing labor that the reader is then urged to recapitulate for themselves.

A non-philosophical ethos

In many of his books, Laruelle focuses on "the individual, finite, or radical immanence of the subject," which differentiates the latter from any conventional form of subjectivity.⁸⁵ Indeed, more than anything else, ordinarity in a non-philosophical context signifies "man considered in his finitude," a real, lived experience of the immanent, undivided individual grounded in nothing other than themselves.⁸⁶ The image of the finite, individual subject remains a philosophical penchant – a covert anthropology, even – from which Laruelle never seems to have recovered. As one would expect, he claims to deploy this concept in a manner quite distinct from that of the post-Kantian philosophy with which we are familiar, depicting the essence of man as "nothing-but-subject or an absolute-as-subject," an identification of "the absolute with finitude rather than with an infinite totality."⁸⁷ The subject is "impenetrable and constituted once and for all," possessing a self-knowledge as finite as itself, bearing no relationship to the "infinite, unlimited subject that includes objective-scientific knowledge as one of its modes, that borders and extends beyond that knowledge."⁸⁸ But this just amplifies what Brassier describes as "the post-Kantian pathos of finitude" and raises further questions about the relationship between the ordinary man and his worldly, philosophically-interpellated counterpart.⁸⁹

For Brassier, Laruelle's retention of this theme betrays the extent to which the latter's critique "remains all too beholden to Heidegger's phenomenological radicalization" of this pathos of finitude, dissolving the subject/object divide only to situate immanence "squarely on the side of the subject."⁹⁰ I would venture, however, that there is an even more important aspect to this pathos, the origins of which lie in a tradition much older than Heideggerian phenomenology. Specifically, one can still identify in Laruelle the retention of what Ian Hunter calls "the pathos of metaphysical longing and the ethos of intellectual self-purification," the central impetus of a longstanding tradition of university metaphysics whereby the philosopher inculcates a set of ascetic rituals in their followers that, through speculation and abstraction, promise to purify their souls of sensible contaminants and thereby release them from the facticity of their worldly existence.⁹¹ Laruelle suspends the asymptotic relationship between sensible finitude and an inaccessible absolute (which is as appreciable in contemporary theory as it is in eighteenth-century rationalism), but does so in order to instead identify the ordinary subject's finitude

with the absolute. So whereas Kant, say, amplifies this pathos by foreclosing noumena to theoretical reason, leaving rational beings with the mere prospect of vainly striving toward this inaccessible realm, Laruelle absolutizes it, positing no external ideal toward which one might strive, however fruitlessly, but instead making finitude the ordinary man's essential trait, such that his very existence is defined by a solitude which continually comes into conflict with his position as a being in the world. A world toward which he has to continuously work at maintaining an indifferent posture, lest he remain trapped within philosophical discourse's "practice of aporia" and "culture of malaise."⁹²

Now, Laruelle himself would insist that ordinary man does not *have to* do anything of the sort. We must take care, he reminds us, not to project a philosophical teleology on to a project built upon "an absolutely infinite *de jure* openness of theoretical labor, knowledge production encountering no ontological limit, no philosophical purpose."⁹³ Not only does non-philosophy not claim to change the world, it does not even attempt to interpret it. It does not purport to fix any of philosophy's limitations or drawbacks. And it certainly does not claim to equip man with a self-knowledge that he does not already possess. "Real critique," Laruelle states, "is carried out by means of the One, but not for the One, because the One does not need it" – a rigorous science of man is grounded in ordinary individuals' fully and sufficiently determined essence, and thus, whilst it unilaterally proceeds from these individuals, they would not lose or miss out on anything were this science (which is occasioned through man's contingent encounter with philosophical materials) not to exist.⁹⁴ The ordinary man "knows (himself) as never having been a piece of the authoritarian machine, as never having had any care, concern, interest *of his own*."⁹⁵ Non-philosophy, taken on its own terms, does not succeed or fail – or at least, it does not rely upon any extrinsic criteria for such a determination. Either its theory works or it does not.

We must separate the claims Laruelle puts forward, however, from the stance he takes and the subject position his writings try to cultivate in their reader. Although his science forecloses such analysis, concerning itself solely with individuals who are not "visible on the social, historical, or linguistic surface," there is no reason we need restrict ourselves in the same fashion.⁹⁶ Again, non-philosophy may well be a science of ordinary men, but when one gets right down to it, it is not actually *for* the ordinary man, since he is, as we are constantly told, totally powerless, passive, and self-sufficient. What remains illegible within non-philosophy's narrow analytical boundaries is the question of who exactly *it is for* and how their subjectivity relates to that of the ordinary man. But it is nevertheless clear, across Laruelle's writings, talks, and interviews, that non-philosophy *is* aimed at a specific audience with specific interests and priorities, and who possess specific kinds of cultural capital. An audience who are able to effect non-philosophical maneuvers and are in turn able to be affected by these same maneuvers. Non-philosophy, as Gangle observes, is "ultimately *for us here in the world*," and this means it "necessitates stringent conceptual labours."⁹⁷

In a recent interview, in fact, Laruelle remarks upon his realization that "in addition to conceptual materiality, there is an affective materiality which is a true 'milieu' of existence," reflecting a "need to communicate" and make his thoughts known.⁹⁸ And as is typically the case with philosophers, this communicative imperative tacitly involves inducting his readers or listeners into a particular ethos. It does not matter whether or not the individual is, according to Laruelle's dicta, ontologically compelled to work toward non-philosophical outcomes; rather, the crucial thing is that his writings very clearly try to guide the reader toward a certain subject position in line with these outcomes:

we are attempting to lead philosophers, rather than to renounce philosophy, to break through the ultimate barriers of philosophical imagery and even the speculative Imagination and to give themselves the means to finally think the unthinkable as unthinkable without contradiction, to describe what is speculatively indescribable without paradox. We are attempting to pass from the One's transcendent figures to its essence.⁹⁹

In fact, this outward refusal of all teleology is central both to the articulation of this subject position and to the ongoing work of differentiating non-philosophy from philosophy, painting the latter as comparatively peremptory and dictatorial, interpellating subjects into its pre-formed narratives.

The true “subject” of non-philosophy, in this sense, is not the ordinary man, who is by necessity nothing more than an abstract axiom, but the imagined reader, the prospective inductee into the non-philosophical project: someone who is “condemned to action,” and thus also “condemned a second time, and for the same reasons, to philosophy,” and yet sees something of themselves in this axiom and the tasks stemming from it.¹⁰⁰ Someone who wonders if “the Greeks really as important and unavoidable as those who have put their faith in them claim.”¹⁰¹ Someone who finds they have something in common with “gnostics, dualists, heretics, millenarianists, and ‘fanatics’ – that is, all those individuals who fundamentally proclaim their individuality against philosophy rather than at its margins.”¹⁰² Someone dissatisfied with the “coded, repetitive, and fetishistic” nature of “traditional philosophical practice.”¹⁰³ In other words, a quite particular kind of individual, far from either an ordinary or any given person in any sense. Not necessarily a philosopher by profession, but certainly someone involved in these debates, and who deals with philosophy, most likely in an academic or para-academic context.

Such an individual is not obliged to start adopting a non-philosophical posture, since it would not by any measure ‘improve’ their philosophical work, which will never escape its ensnarement within the aporetic circle of decision and sufficiency. But they *are* able to make room for other ways of thinking, by forgoing the customary gestures of displacing or deconstructing this discipline’s norms and boundaries, and instead attempting to circumscribe their own radical finitude *vis-à-vis* all philosophical materials (and accordingly circumscribing the boundaries of these materials, suspending their pretension to not only represent, but in some way constitute the real) – a task which demands an ongoing inner labor, extracting non-philosophical possibilities from philosophical materiality and employing them as the basis for an open-ended, pluralized, and creative project, forming statements and descriptions unconstrained by philosophy’s rules. The ordinary man may well be “a radically individual reality who precedes philosophy, who does not need the *logos*’ universality in order to realize himself.”¹⁰⁴ But the aspiring non-philosopher, who is condemned to be occupied with worldly pursuits and exigencies, must constantly work at keeping up a posture congruent with this axiom: a work that, in spite of all its rhetorical gestures, conveniently serves to promote an unremitting productivity (often referred to as the creation of *philo-fiction* and *hyper-speculation*) and is optimally expressed in the form of standard academic outputs (e.g. books, chapters, journal articles, conference papers, doctoral theses, etc.).¹⁰⁵

Functionally, this subject position differs little from that of many prior philosophies which have proclaimed the need to adopt a specific mode of comportment and manner of speaking in order to think the unthinkable and describe the indescribable.¹⁰⁶ Laruelle’s assertion that “it will never be possible for thinkers who exercise the human freedom of thought and those who postulate the authority of texts to come to an understanding,” actually fits quite neatly with the skepticism toward erudition and book-learning characteristic of numerous post-Cartesian philosophical systems that exhort their readers to not just rote learn prefabricated propositions but actively take part in the rational cognition proper to philosophy.¹⁰⁷

In Laruelle’s case, though he is careful to underscore that no one *needs* to follow the non-philosophical path, that it has no *stakes* in any conventional sense, he nevertheless makes it clear that, in his estimation, philosophy is a stultifying, unimaginative, depleted force – incapable of “carrying out the theoretical and technical mutations which the sciences and the arts – above all painting and music – have carried out” over the past century – and non-philosophy holds out the only fruitful and thoroughgoing means of thinking beyond its parameters.¹⁰⁸ The ordinary man’s finitude is simply given, it is a fact, it does not need to be achieved, he does not need to enter into any process of individuation or becoming, but the supposedly rigorous science offered by non-philosophy very clearly does require ongoing work, involving “the labor that follows from the rectification of non-philosophical descriptions or formulations.”¹⁰⁹ The pathos of continual inner labor, not striving to transcend one’s finitude (as in

more conventional instances of university metaphysics), but instead striving to keep up a principled indifference to the determinative power of philosophical decision and sufficiency.

The ordinariness of philosophy

Laruelle is resolutely determined to overcome the divided conception of man as exemplified by the post-Kantian empirico-transcendental doublet, but he still retains two basic postulates undergirding this ambivalent figure: first, that the human subject is condemned to worldly (i.e. philosophical) existence; and second, that the subject is never exhausted by this existence, and recognition of and reflection upon its own finitude provides a means of eluding philosophical determination. By positing the One as unreflective and indeterminable, Laruelle is able to abandon the notion that this analytic of finitude provides the means for reconciling man's alienated nature. But this does not mean such an analytic does not effectively take place within his own work. If it is the case that philosophy "has not ceased repressing and resisting another way of thinking," one surely has good reason to engage in the non-philosophical enterprise, even if there is no apparent existential compulsion to do so.¹¹⁰ And whilst, at a rhetorical level, Laruelle often seems concerned by the ways in which philosophical interpellation arrogates and recuperates the achievements of those who are genuinely capable of creating something new, his primary concern is still, in the end, the academic philosopher.

Laruelle's preoccupation with the image of the ordinary man is symptomatic of the subject position toward which he tries to guide the reader, "putting them in a new scientific posture or relationship *with their own philosophy*."¹¹¹ He is effectively offering a kind of self-help – or maybe a "spiritual exercise," to use a less inflammatory term – for disaffected philosophers.¹¹² An accusation that might seem a shade derisive, but is not intended as such. As an intellectual exercise, a peculiar variation on the procedures of transcendental reduction, non-philosophy offers considerable resources, permitting both reflection upon the shortcomings of our own scholarly practices and hopefully opening up new ways of thinking. But though its approach is quite original, especially in its assiduous commitment to formalism, there is no reason to believe it has unequalled purchase on the real; on the contrary, it fits quite neatly into a long lineage of similar forms of academic self-cultivation.

"Despite their statements to the contrary (in order to signal the exceptional character of their discipline)," writes Laruelle, "philosophy's existence is a mundane phenomenon."¹¹³ Yet non-philosophy does not actually treat it as such; instead, it depicts philosophy as *extraordinary*, a uniquely aporetic, hallucinatory, and domineering form of power, its authorities "at least as powerful as their political counterparts", pitted against the ordinary man who derives both his validity and his reality entirely from himself.¹¹⁴ And this likewise puts non-philosophy in a uniquely impactful position, offering "our only chance for peace in the midst of ideological, cultural, and moral conflicts."¹¹⁵ Surely, if we are trying to cut philosophy (or at least its more immodest instances) down to size, it would be more effective, albeit perhaps less methodologically elaborate, to instead emphasize that it is just one in an endless array of discourses, accompanied by a particular set of formal rules and a distinctive manner of speaking – and as a corollary, just one of many ways of identifying an audience and delimiting an imagined community; just another means of cultivating a particular posture within a particular institutional setting.

To think philosophy in this fashion – treating "its various anthropologies as optional and equivalent means through which certain individuals forge the relation to the self," as Ian Hunter proposes, doctrines "whose historical circumstances, purposes and distribution are matters of historical investigation and description" – is to abandon the pathos of finitude, that lingering trace of the empirico-transcendental doublet, whereby such formal determinations are treated as barriers to be overcome through transcendental reflection, and to instead perceive such reflection as one of the many historically and institutionally contingent discursive technologies through which we are interpellated as invariably bounded subjects and by which we distinguish ourselves from others.¹¹⁶ Following Judith Butler's suggestion that "the play between the ordinary and non-ordinary is crucial to the process of relaborating and reworking the constraints that maintain the limits of speakability and, consequently,

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the viability of the subject,” we must play more attention to the formal mechanisms by which this very distinction is constituted, structured, and organized.¹¹⁷

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Endnotes:

- ¹ Han-Pile, “The Analytic of Finitude,” 125.
- ² Foucault, *Order of Things*, 421.
- ³ Foucault, *Order of Things*, 421, translation altered.
- ⁴ Laruelle, *En tant qu’un*, 248, my translation. I follow Laruelle’s usage of the noun ‘man’ and the masculine pronouns that accompany it throughout this article. This is in no way an endorsement of the now-outmoded (within English) convention of defaulting to such language in preference to gender-neutral terms.
- ⁵ Laruelle, *En tant qu’un*, 248.
- ⁶ Laruelle divests this term, “the One,” of its usual Neoplatonic connotations, lamenting that philosophers “have refused from the start to shed light upon the One’s essence” (*Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 33).
- ⁷ Laruelle, *En tant qu’un*, 249.
- ⁸ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 5, translation altered.
- ⁹ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 7.
- ¹⁰ For the purposes of this article, I focus principally upon a few select books drawn from Laruelle’s corpus: viz. *Le principe de minorité* (1981), *A Biography of Ordinary Man* (1985 [2018]), *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy* (1989 [2013]), *En tant qu’un* (1991), *Theory of Identities* (1992 [2016]), and *Théorie des Étrangers* (1995).
- ¹¹ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 1.
- ¹² De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, v.
- ¹³ Frow and Morris, “Introduction,” xxvii.
- ¹⁴ Daring, *Exit Capitalism*, 96.
- ¹⁵ Felski, *Doing Time*, 156.
- ¹⁶ Probyn, *Sexing the Self*, 146; Ang, *Living Room Wars*, 93.
- ¹⁷ Hartley, *Short History of Cultural Studies*, 121.
- ¹⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A xiii.
- ¹⁹ Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre*, 144.
- ²⁰ On *homo duplex*, see Durkheim, “The Dualism of Human Nature and Its Social Conditions.”
- ²¹ Laruelle, *Le principe de minorité*, 13, my translation.
- ²² Laruelle, *Le principe de minorité*, 16.
- ²³ For my earlier (slightly less developed, perhaps) thoughts on this book, see Sutherland and Patsoura, “Human-in-the-Last-Instance” and Sutherland, “Authoritarian and Minoritarian Thought.”
- ²⁴ Gangle, “Laruelle and Ordinary Life,” 61.
- ²⁵ Laruelle, *Théorie des Étrangers*, 50.
- ²⁶ Laruelle, *Théorie des Étrangers*, 50.
- ²⁷ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 4.
- ²⁸ Laruelle, *Théorie des Étrangers*, 22
- ²⁹ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 5.
- ³⁰ On the relationship between philosophical decision and the concept of man, see Laruelle, *Théorie des Étrangers*, 38-41.
- ³¹ Laruelle, *Théorie des Étrangers*, 106.
- ³² Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 6.
- ³³ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 157.
- ³⁴ Laruelle, *En tant qu’un*, 209. This book also contains interviews by Didier Cahen and Philippe Petit, all referenced throughout this article.
- ³⁵ Laugier, “Emerson,” 45-46, my translation.
- ³⁶ Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 238.
- ³⁷ Cavell, *Pitch of Philosophy*, 3.
- ³⁸ Laruelle, *En tant qu’un*, 220-221.
- ³⁹ Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 126
- ⁴⁰ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 172.

⁴¹ See Gracieuse, “Laruelle Facing Deleuze,” 54.

⁴² Laruelle, *Théorie des Étrangers*, 106. In this way, writes Alex Dubilet, “the human is taken as fundamentally a kind of evanescent solitude, one that can never be fully exhausted or interpellated by the World and by philosophy, which try to identify or fix it with particular universal attributes and generalizations” (“(Non-)Human Identity and Radical Immanence,” 32).

⁴³ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 3.

⁴⁴ Sackin-Poll, “Ordinary Contested,” 246.

⁴⁵ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 9.

⁴⁶ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 107.

⁴⁷ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 9.

⁴⁸ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 9.

⁴⁹ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 162, translation altered.

⁵⁰ Brassier, “Axiomatic Heresy,” 24.

⁵¹ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 15. “Laruelle decided at an early moment in his philosophical development,” write Alexander Galloway and Jason LaRivière, “to reject the excessively expressive in favor of the compressive” (“Compression in Philosophy,” 140).

⁵² Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 12. The French *suffisance* signifies not only adequacy, but also vanity, arrogance, and self-importance.

⁵³ Laruelle, *En tant qu’un*, 221.

⁵⁴ Laugier, “Emerson,” 46.

⁵⁵ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 8.

⁵⁶ Laruelle, *Théorie des Étrangers*, 69.

⁵⁷ de Man, “Epistemology of Metaphor,” 13.

⁵⁸ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 20. “Just as philosophy is spontaneously ‘figurative’ in a broad sense, describing a given figure of the World, language, objects, and the like or a transcendent Being, so non-philosophy is ‘abstract,’ founded in the being-immanent of the One” (Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 23, translation altered).

⁵⁹ Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 42.

⁶⁰ Anne-Françoise Schmid’s “non-epistemological” take on the philosophy of science is an admirable exception to this (see in particular her recent *Épistémologie générique*, co-authored with biologist Muriel Mambrini-Doudet).

⁶¹ This is not to discount some very interesting adaptations of non-philosophy within English-language “theory”: e.g. Anthony Paul Smith’s *A Non-Philosophical Theory of Nature* (2013), Alexander Galloway’s *Laruelle: Against the Digital* (2014), Katerina Kolozova’s *Cut of the Real* (2014), John Ó Maoilearca’s *All Thoughts Are Equal* (2015), and Jonathan Fardy’s *Laruelle and Art* (2020).

⁶² Kraus, “Ecceity, Smash and Grab, the Expanded I and Moment,” 304.

⁶³ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 20.

⁶⁴ Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 130.

⁶⁵ Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 46.

⁶⁶ Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 45.

⁶⁷ Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 45.

⁶⁸ Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 137.

⁶⁹ Although Laruelle emphasizes, at various points, that “minorities only exist in the state of multiplicities” (*Biography of Ordinary Man*, 26), these multiplicities being the basis of the more political aspects of the non-philosophical project (not covered in this article, for brevity’s sake), his aversion to any relative (“stato-minoritarian”) conception of unity or difference means they are still ultimately defined by nothing other than their individuality or finitude.

⁷⁰ James, *New French Philosophy*, 179.

⁷¹ Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 22.

⁷² Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 1.

⁷³ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 37.

- ⁷⁴ Laruelle, *En tant qu'un*, 227. See also Sutherland, “Style without Substance, Form *qua* Function.”
- ⁷⁵ Debray, *Introduction à la médiologie*, 97, my translation.
- ⁷⁶ Laruelle, *En tant qu'un*, 253.
- ⁷⁷ Laruelle, “New Presentation of Non-Philosophy,” 137. The Middlesex University philosophy department was, amidst much controversy, closed in 2010 (for financial reasons, unsurprisingly), with its postgraduate research programs, and many senior staff, eventually relocating to Kingston University London.
- ⁷⁸ Felski, *Doing Time*, 155.
- ⁷⁹ Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 31.
- ⁸⁰ Laruelle, *Théorie des Étrangers*, 17.
- ⁸¹ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 16.
- ⁸² Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 20. On this periodization, see especially Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, 33-36.
- ⁸³ James, *New French Philosophy*, 175.
- ⁸⁴ Cavell, *Pitch of Philosophy*, 3.
- ⁸⁵ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 14.
- ⁸⁶ Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 23.
- ⁸⁷ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 8-9.
- ⁸⁸ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 107.
- ⁸⁹ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 127.
- ⁹⁰ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 127.
- ⁹¹ Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments*, 57.
- ⁹² Laruelle, *Théorie des Étrangers*, 16.
- ⁹³ Laruelle, *Theory of Identities*, 66, translation altered. “I do not suggest any rules about what to do – everyone should continue doing what they have started to do – I propose no goal, no teleology whatsoever, I merely describe. What do I describe? The real relation between man and philosophy” (Laruelle, *En tant qu'un*, 236).
- ⁹⁴ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 136.
- ⁹⁵ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 144.
- ⁹⁶ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 19.
- ⁹⁷ Gangle, “Laruelle and Ordinary Life,” 62.
- ⁹⁸ Laruelle et al., “Entretien avec François Laruelle,” 71, my translation. Laruelle has, on many other occasions, complained about philosophy’s incessant recourse to communication – see in particular Laruelle, “Truth According to Hermes.”
- ⁹⁹ Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 35, translation altered.
- ¹⁰⁰ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 1.
- ¹⁰¹ Laruelle, *En tant qu'un*, 228.
- ¹⁰² Laruelle, *En tant qu'un*, 225.
- ¹⁰³ Laruelle, *En tant qu'un*, 240.
- ¹⁰⁴ Laruelle, *En tant qu'un*, 250.
- ¹⁰⁵ “The finished product of this enterprise: the production of non-philosophical statements from philosophical statements. This is what we also call philo-fiction or hyper-speculation. Instead of producing effects that merely have a non-philosophical appearance, on the basis of procedures that remain philosophical (which is what Heidegger and Derrida do), we propose to produce effects that are really non-philosophical, but ultimately bear a ‘family resemblance’ to philosophy” (Laruelle, *En tant qu'un*, 40). For a contrastive account, underscoring non-philosophy’s anti-productivist ambitions, see Coley, “In Defence of ‘Noir Theory’.”
- ¹⁰⁶ For a further exploration of this argument in relation to broader philosophical trends in Western thought, see Sutherland, *Speaking Philosophically*.
- ¹⁰⁷ Laruelle, *Théorie des Étrangers*, 201. On this skepticism toward erudition, which begins with Descartes but is articulated more explicitly by Malebranche, and carries through at least as far as Hegel and Kierkegaard, see Gueroult, *Dianoématique* and subsequent volumes.

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¹⁰⁸ Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 4.

¹⁰⁹ Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 245.

¹¹⁰ Laruelle, *Theory of Identities*, 16.

¹¹¹ Laruelle, *En tant qu'un*, 13

¹¹² This notion of philosophy as a form of spiritual exercise was popularized by Hadot (see *Philosophy as a Way of Life*), who regards the various schools of Graeco-Roman antiquity as prioritizing *paideia* over *theōria*. Hunter views such inner labor as characteristic of university metaphysics more broadly, including in the contemporary theoretical scene (see “History of Theory”).

¹¹³ Laruelle, *Theory of Identities*, 253, translation altered.

¹¹⁴ Laruelle, *En tant qu'un*, 253

¹¹⁵ Laruelle, *En tant qu'un*, 252.

¹¹⁶ Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments*, 24.

¹¹⁷ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 144.