

Speculative Philosophy

General Introduction

Speculative philosophy is generally understood as a systematic and comprehensive account of human existence and the universe that encompasses both the natural sciences of the organic and inorganic world as well as the human sciences of cognition, social life, and the domains of art, religion, and philosophy. In the history of ideas and culture speculative philosophy denotes a broad range of philosophical approaches and traditions that normally cluster around metaphysics and systematic treatments of existence, consciousness and free will. Contemporary philosophy has explicitly rejected the systematic nature of speculative philosophy even though some of its practitioners have not objected to being loosely described as speculative philosophers. On the other hand, a narrow conception of speculative philosophy as simply non-empirical theorizing is disputed by other philosophers. In a sense all philosophy is speculative insofar as it deals with universal ideas. The specific verification or refutation of those ideas is always problematic. Speculative thought sometimes views empirical validity as either of secondary importance or irrelevant altogether. At other times, it seeks to clarify the exact nature of how something like an idea or the nature of experience is to be verified or validated.

It is common today to identify speculative thinking with Continental European philosophy and to view its various schools and approaches as being in conflict with the twentieth century Anglo-American tradition of analytic philosophy and its various allegiances with scientific realism and non-unitary methodologies. This is, however, incorrect since the term “speculative” was used in a technical sense by G.W.F. Hegel long before J.S. Mill made the distinction between analytic and continental philosophy in the nineteenth century. Immanuel Kant before Hegel also associated the term with pure reason and transcendental ideas. Furthermore, speculative philosophy has been seen by many writers as epitomized in ancient Greek philosophy with its more than thousand year tradition stretching from the earliest Pre-Socratics to the late Platonic philosophy of Proclus and Damascius. Although the medieval world often viewed philosophy as a *propylaeum* to theology, systematic thinkers such as St. Thomas Aquinas discussed the speculative knowledge that God has of himself and this is speculative knowledge *par excellence*. Others take speculative philosophy in a much wider sense to embrace both Western and non-Western philosophies and religions.

The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century is often interpreted historically as a revolt against the teleologically based speculations of the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic cosmology and the medieval Scholastics. This is also an anachronism since science and its paradigms frequently invoke speculative principles and ideas to shore up insights into the putative certainties and uncertainties of evidence gathering and empirical knowledge. A famous example would be René Descartes’ use of the ontological argument in the *Meditations on First Philosophy* to solidify the connection between thought and extension and ultimately to overcome universal scepticism. A common theme in speculative philosophy is its persistent efforts to defeat both scepticism and

dogmatism, while at the same time trying to avoid collapsing into unbridled critique without positive results.

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1. The Term

The term “speculative” derives from the Latin words *specere*, *specto*, *speculatio*, and *speculator*. *Speculum* means mirror and the notions of reflection, reflective consciousness and reflectedness figure prominently in certain speculative philosophies, especially German Idealism. Literally, the Latin root means to "look at", "behold", "observe", "explore", "investigate", or "contemplate". Its original philosophical source, however, is to be found in classical Greek philosophy. Terms like *theoria*, *idein* and *voein*, all etymologically connected with “seeing” and “vision,” are prevalent in Pre-Socratic philosophy as well as the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. The positive significance, philosophically, of meditating on or thinking about the universe or a subject, stands in contrast to the casual use of the term as some form of gambling, idle thinking, or conjecture without any hard evidence or rigorous logical analysis. "Speculative" in ordinary language is often used pejoratively, but in always a futural sense, to denote socially suspect economic activities such as real estate speculation or speculative bubbles in the stock markets. Even in economics there are debates about good and bad speculation.

Generally speaking, speculative philosophy is only rarely given a precise definition. Like many sub-currents in philosophy it has widely divergent sets of associations - scientific, literary or religious. Some of these are linked with particular philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Proclus, Aquinas, Kant or Hegel, while others are attached to historical periods, for example, Greek cosmological speculation, or identified with certain types of intellectual history, like the

universal histories of civilization one finds in Bossuet or Toynbee. Speculative philosophy is, on the one hand, an extremely vague term that can denote almost any thought orientation, and in other cases it is strictly defined, as Kant endeavours to do in the realm of transcendental ideas with his concept of pure speculative reason, or Hegel's treatment of the term as a technical logical moment that signifies the unifying power of positive reason.

Within the Western philosophical tradition, the "speculative" is normally associated with metaphysics, first philosophy, theology, cosmology, absolute-theory, and in general with theoretical knowledge. Speculative philosophies of history also have their own category as does speculative theology. Given that philosophy, irrespective of its cultural or historical context, deals with ideas and original thoughts, there is a sense in which the speculative is identical with any form of philosophizing. Anti-metaphysical and empirical philosophies can thus be taken as forms of speculating about what the true nature of philosophy should be, even if the starting point, or what is taken as the given, is accepted uncritically.

Speculative philosophy is often associated with self-enclosed systems of thought. Traditionally, it is understood as an all-encompassing theory of the universe and the place of human beings within the order of things. As such it is a non-verifiable narrative of the whole of reality. Prior to the nineteenth century the definition of philosophy as a comprehensive system was usually taken for granted. John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, the manifesto of modern empirical philosophy, is still an "essay" in the Enlightenment sense of a large-scale, systematic treatise, and not a short reflection on a particular topic. Piecemeal reflections and thought exercises are procedures in analytical philosophy generally associated with G.E. Moore and others in the Anglo-American tradition. The speculative orientation has its source in the conviction that the discipline of philosophy is a unique undertaking, irreducible to any particular science or religion, and ought to be expressed as such, if it is to be true to its basic concept. Its concern with the whole, the total, the irreducible, and the non-derivable is essential to its self-understanding.

Often understood as "thought" in its purest and most free form, speculative philosophy develops its content wholly out of itself - unlike the physical sciences, the social sciences, or humanistic studies which take their subject matter as something given and predetermined. It is a philosophical stance that naturally resists categorization as a social science or a particular form of humanism. The predominant forms of philosophical inquiry in the contemporary world, as practised by professional philosophers, are viewed by speculative philosophers as corruptions of the fundamental concept of philosophy because they approach the content of philosophical inquiry from the outside, usually by way of the mechanism of this or that abstract methodology - itself often appropriated from another discipline. The subject matter of the modern cognitive sciences, and philosophies of language and analysis in general, is embedded in content that the speculative philosopher tries to unmask through reconstituting that content within a totality that cannot be undermined by anything that it contextualizes. This is not for speculative reason merely a matter of critical thinking, for which it is today often mistaken. Argument and counter-argument, for which there is no *terminus ad quem*, is viewed by speculative philosophy, both ancient and modern, as only the discursive subset of the human condition, of rationality, and

our relation to the natural universe.

2. History

Speculative philosophy, historically, is connected with the works of Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and especially Proclus in the ancient world, St. Thomas Aquinas in the late medieval period, and Kant and Hegel in modern times. There is identifiable thread of arguments in these thinkers which says that the full significance of speculative philosophy is only comprehended by way of the concentrated effort of working systematically and developmentally through its content. Development may be variously aligned with the historical, as in Hegel, or by the Promethean method of conceptual dialectical articulation as one finds in *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Philebus*, and *Timeaus*. These are the Platonic dialogues that had the greatest formative influence on the speculative systems of late Platonism.

Nor should speculative philosophy be understood simply as intuitive. This is often claimed by mystical visionaries who work the labyrinths of negative theology *via* the discursive arguments of negative versus positive predication as one finds so brilliantly presented in Plato's *Parmenides*, or in *The Mystical Theology* and *The Divine Names* of the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus. Unifying philosophy and theology is frequently a goal of speculative thinking. The content of speculative philosophy is not fully represented in logical thought-determinations. As understood by the German Idealists, speculative philosophy purports to be the most complete unity of the differentiations of subjectivity and objectivity. Yet this unity is itself an abstract differentiation, if expressed solely in propositional form. The propositional "attitude" prevails in the predominantly unspeculative environment of modern philosophy. Attempted recent breakouts from reductionistic scientific realism, such as one finds in Thomas Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos*, are viewed by many contemporary philosophers as anti-scientific and odiously speculative, even though Nagel's work is very tentative and still primarily in the thought-world of contemporary American analytical philosophy. The "speculative" within this context may be said to illuminate the self-imposed discursive limitations of scientific realism.

Some philosophers have explicitly defined the "speculative" as the highest possible achievement of philosophical inquiry. For instance, G.W.F. Hegel remarks in Part I of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, [para.82]:

What was some time ago remarked respecting the Idea, may be applied to this common usage of the term 'speculation': and we may add that people who rank themselves amongst the educated expressly speak of speculation even as if it were something purely subjective. A certain theory of some conditions and circumstances of nature or mind may be, say these people, very fine and correct as a matter of speculation, but it contradicts experience and nothing of this sort is admissible in reality. To this the answer is, that the speculative is in its true signification, neither preliminarily nor even definitively, something merely subjective: that, on the contrary, it expressly rises above such oppositions as that

between subjective and objective, which the understanding cannot get over, and absorbing them in itself, evinces its concrete and all-embracing nature. A one-sided proposition therefore can never even give expression to a speculative truth.

Hegel's "speculative proposition or sentence" (*The Phenomenology of Mind*, tr. Miller, para. 61) cannot be approached propositionally. What is meant is first located or determined within a subject. This meaning is further elaborated and transferred to the predicate. This is then ultimately bent back again into the subject for a final determination of its meaning. The whole process ends in the Absolute Idea where there is no further process. Hegel's philosophy is post-categorical, and beyond any possible original commentary, in that any further elaboration of his system must be within the system. Categorical delineation has been taken just about as far as can be in Hegel's philosophy without provoking a non-categorical philosophical response.

In the nineteenth century there were numerous answers to the speculative endeavours of the German Idealists. F.W.J. Schelling in his last period tried to move beyond Hegel's "negative philosophy" with a proto-existential notion of a "positive philosophy." The last word in classical German Idealism may very well belong to Schelling in his critique of Hegelianism in the lectures of the 1840s.¹ The rise of putatively non-idealistic positivism, experimental science, and the hypothetical-deductive methods of the laboratory resulted in the re-categorization of the "speculative" as phantasmagorical in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This is a labelling that speculative philosophy assiduously but unsuccessfully tried to avoid. The later Neo-Idealisms of the nineteenth century were unable to protect speculative philosophy from the association. During this period a more rigid divide also opened up between science and religion especially with the vast expansion of geological time, the growing acceptance of Darwinism, and technological progress. Speculative philosophy, when not specifically aligned with science or religion, was variously invoked to reinforce that divide or to lay out strategies and possibilities for their reconciliation.

Borden Parker Bowne, a now little known late nineteenth century American philosopher, understood speculative philosophy as addressing two questions: (1) How is knowledge possible? (2) What is reality? The first question is epistemological, the second metaphysical.² Speculative philosophy is the wider term. Metaphysics deals with ontology and objective reality as well as cosmology and psychology. Epistemology is the science of cognition, truth, and knowledge. While it may be easy to associate Bowne with the Neo-Idealists of his time, his metaphysical conclusions bring to the fore the stark contrast between organicism and mechanism - a constant theme with which speculative philosophy struggles. In Bowne's words which pre-echo Nagel's:

The first point is the impossibility of construing the mind as the resultant of the interaction of any number of physical or impersonal elements. Along with this goes the parallel conviction of the impossibility of constructing thought by any mechanical juxtaposition of associational union of particular mental states, arising in or through the nerves, or representing simple affections of a passive sensibility. The failure of this view is complete, and philosophy is rapidly coming to the

recognition of the fact.

The result is that thought is to be viewed as an organic activity, unfolding organically from within and not mechanically put together from without.³

Bowne sees mind as the only ontological reality. An extra-mental world, or mind independent reality as we say today, is the deepest conviction of common sense realism. Upon inquiry, however, speculative philosophy invariably reveals that ideas are the only conceptual reality. This is the progress of speculative thought. Intelligence is an ultimate for Bowne, as it must be for all speculative thought, and all it can do is accept itself, even though it may claim to account for everything else.

Alfred Whitehead, in *Process and Reality*, entitles Part I “The Speculative Scheme” and Chapter I of Part I “Speculative Philosophy.” He then famously defines “speculative philosophy” as:

the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted.⁴

Furthermore, he says that the method of philosophy is descriptive generalization, unlike that of mathematics which is deductive. Ultimately the useful function of philosophy is “to promote the most general systematization of civilized thought.”⁵ Integral to speculative thought is the interaction of novelty and order. Whitehead does not wish that the “massiveness of order degenerate into mere repetition; and so that novelty is always reflected upon a background of system.”⁶

A strict separation of speculative thought and religion, and religion and cosmology, is not to be found in *Process and Reality*. God and the World are instruments of novelty for the other. For Whitehead, creativity is the ultimate metaphysical principle. He then retreats into the dynamic of the Platonic one and many to portray this relation.

Thus God is to be conceived as one and as many in the converse sense in which the World is to be conceived as many and as one. The theme of cosmology, which is the basis of all religions, is the story of the dynamic effort of the World passing into everlasting unity, and of the static majesty of God’s vision, accomplishing its purpose of completion by absorption of the World’s multiplicity of effort.⁷

These free creations of actualities always involve some element of spontaneous construction in any series of antecedent and consequent determination.

The often cited, but incorrect, alignment of speculative philosophy with Continental philosophy is attributable largely to Bertrand Russell’s *A History of Western Philosophy*.⁸ He distinguishes the British and Continental schools as primarily one of method. The former is inductive, detailed, and piecemeal, while the latter inversely erects a vast edifice of deduction upon a pinpoint of logical principle, such as Leibniz’s monadology. Russell then proceeds to

divide the camps in terms of metaphysics, ethics, and politics. With respect to politics, Locke for instance, is always tentative in his beliefs. He was content to let everything be decided by free discussion and incremental reform. On the other hand, Continental philosophers tended, on the basis of big picture metaphysics, to espouse revolution, heroism and self-sacrifice. Speculative philosophers, such as Hegel, would completely abhor Russell's either/or mind set. For them induction can no more be separated from deduction than the converse. Aristotle's definition of wisdom (*sophia*) said as much in his portrayal of the intellectual or dianoetic virtues in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

C.D. Broad, a British philosopher, in "Some Methods of Speculative Philosophy," written in the middle of the twentieth century, made a well known attempt to define the peculiar methodology of speculative philosophy. Broad is of the view that speculative philosophy, or at least those who describe their philosophical activity as speculative, always involves "synopsis" and "synthesis" and that this is to be clearly distinguished from philosophical "analysis."⁹ Synopsis is the more fundamental term. It provides the stimulus for analysis and is the basis of synthesis.¹⁰ That philosophers as historically remote as Plato, or as encyclopaedic as Hegel, can be said to have engaged in both synthesis and analysis is not relevant. The issue for Broad is one of philosophical orientation. The thinking of Aristotle and Hegel is deeply teleological and interrelative, that of Moore and Carnap analytical and non-synoptic.

Speculative or synoptic thinkers are keen to point out the perpetual tension between a scientist who theorizes and investigates about humans and the universe, and the unique powers of humans to carry out such investigations and experiments. This tension is today primarily characterized in terms of thinkers who recognize the unique status of a purposive consciousness outside of the order of nature and those who wish to circumscribe that uniqueness within the natural world. While disavowing any possible manual or rule-governed procedures for the methods of speculative philosophers, Broad nonetheless serves up a number of typical orientations. Working from a particular region of fact to a general principle, eg. Aristotle's scientific approach and his concept of matter and form, Broad notes that attention to the marginal and abnormal within familiar pattern are *indicia* of a speculative disposition.¹¹

Unification, hierarchy, and the integration of synthesis and analysis within such hierarchies are carried out by speculative thinkers, according to Broad, in the opposing ways of *Reduction* or *Sublimation*.¹² The reductive type of unification shows that features characteristic of the higher levels in the hierarchy are analysable into those at the lower levels. On the other hand, the sublimative type of unification reveals that high level features are present in a latent or degenerative form at the lower levels. In an attempt to clear away the obscurities, Broad cites respectively materialism in its non-emergent form and Leibniz's mentalism as cases of the reductive and sublimative types of unification.

Another philosopher of the first half of the twentieth century generally associated with speculative philosophy and metaphysics is R. J. Collingwood (1889 - 1943). He noted a deep *nisus* in human nature towards the search for absolute presuppositions. Well known as a philosopher of history and art, and an archeologist in his own right, Collingwood also produced

important texts in the areas of metaphysics, idealism, and the philosophy of mind such as *Speculum Mentis* (1924), *An Essay on Philosophical Method* (1933), and *An Essay on Metaphysics* (1940). Collingwood's views certainly changed over time, especially with regard to the nature of abstract thinking and the relation between philosophy and its own history. Ever since Hegel the philosophical consciousness had become inseparable from the historical consciousness. The issue of historicism and the nature of the philosophical encounter with history, as both an external panorama of civilization and as an internal working out of a complex of perennial paradoxes, had become an enormous problem for speculative philosophy.

In *An Essay on Metaphysics* Collingwood starts out with the observation that there cannot be a science of pure being.¹³ Metaphysics as ontology is thus impossible. He took this as the common thread of modern anti-Aristotelianism in Berkeley's attack on abstract general ideas, in Hume's empiricism, in Kant's insistence that being is no predicate, and in Hegel's equation of pure being with pure nothing at the outset of *The Science of Logic*. What is left is the historicized inquiry into presuppositions. Collingwood distinguishes between relative and absolute presuppositions, though they are not ultimately separable. Absolute presuppositions are not verifiable as are the relative.¹⁴ Collingwood's examples of absolute presuppositions tend to be similar to Kant's a priori synthetic propositions, though he denies they are propositions because they never answer questions and because they are immersed in the fluidity of history. The distinction between truth and falsity does not belong to them. Absolute presuppositions are thus completely outside of the rubric of Kant's Transcendental Analytic and its "logic of truth."

For Collingwood metaphysical analysis is the practice of detecting absolute presuppositions.¹⁵ The purpose of metaphysics is to ascertain the prevalent absolute presuppositions in any given individual thinker or society. This sounds very much like the higher order critical thinking that is commonplace in most contemporary academic environments and humanistic studies, even though Collingwood would object to a critique of any given absolute presupposition that is unmasked since such a critique itself presupposes that the absolute presupposition is vulnerable to evaluation in terms of truth or falsity. All metaphysical questions are thus historical questions for Collingwood.¹⁶ For speculative philosophy the historicization of metaphysics has been a long and tortuous process since the Renaissance. Collingwood's metaphysics of the discovery of absolute presuppositions is peculiar because, though it was able to arise only within the context of this historicizing tendency, it makes no attempt to say that we can or should get rid of such absolutes once they are brought to light. Absolute presuppositions are thus recognized not disputed. This means that philosophy is essentially reflective (*Nachdenken*) and immersed in a developmental, but unredactable, past, as Hegel noted on more than one occasion.

Stephen Pepper in *World Hypotheses* implicitly tries to stabilize Collingwood's absolute presuppositions through the notion of "root metaphors." There obviously exist in the world objects, such as rocks, animals, and solar systems. More covertly, there also exist world hypotheses or theories about the world itself.¹⁷ These hypotheses, unlike the objects of empirical science, deal with knowledge in an unrestricted way. Pepper's own disposition is principally inductive. Nonetheless, he searches for large scale structural corroborations out of regions of

empirical evidence or out of the historical fact that there are always competing schools of philosophy in our intellectual traditions.¹⁸ Root metaphors are induced from world theories.¹⁹ One can also have an hypothesis about the origin of world theories. The history of philosophy is the history of cognition. Like Collingwood, Pepper wishes to move away from whether a certain theory is true to an estimation of its cognitive value. This, of course, creates the unsettling situation of having to evaluate cognitive value in terms of our allegiance to it. Pepper attempts to get around this by declaring that if we take a theory to be true, then an adequate world theory will support it.²⁰

There is a method to the theory of root-metaphor based on a number of maxims, such as a world hypothesis is determined by its root-metaphor, that world hypotheses are autonomous, and that concepts which have lost contact with their root metaphors inevitably become abstractions.²¹ Ultimately, Pepper comes up with four “relatively adequate hypotheses:” formism, mechanism, contextualism, and organicism.²² The first two are analytical theories, while the latter are synthetic. Formism and contextualism have a dispersive plan with an inadequacy of precision, while mechanism and organicism are integrative theories with an inadequacy of scope.²³ Each world hypothesis has a root metaphor. Similarity is the root metaphor of formism, that of mechanism is machine, of contextualism, the historic event, and finally organicism, wherein *process* prevails as does the disposition to integration within that process.

More generally, Collingwood and Pepper are examples of how radical historicism and thorough-going contextualism are the principal relativizing forces in modernity confronted by speculative philosophy. Speculative thinkers tend to see the philosophical imagination as fairly restricted and more or less exhausted in the history of philosophy, like Bowne’s philosophy resurfacing in Nagel’s. This goes very much against the grain of modern philosophy which views the imagination as infinitely fertile, novel, and diverse. Speculative thought is thus seen as a check on eclectic dispersion, at least in Pepper’s estimation. Multiplicative abstractionism is today pervasive in the social sciences and humanities. The abstract grammars created for various subsets of loosely collated “empirical” and “quasi-empirical” data form the basis for many research agendas, the legitimacy of which is circuitously inferred from the syntax created to organize the confusing data within any given empirical domain.

The revolt against abstraction is as much evident in Collingwood and Pepper as it is in Hegel and Heidegger. Hegel, in his celebrated short essay “Who Thinks Abstractly?” threw down the gauntlet to the Enlightenment metaphysics of the understanding (*Verstand*). Speculative thought from Plato’s *Philebus* to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* to Vico’s *New Science*, to Kant’s three *Critiques*, to modern pragmatism, which is an absolute idealism without an absolute, abhors abstract formalism in its many attempts to develop an unassailable approach to the interrelation between thought and being in terms of concrete individuality. The contemporary thinking around “speculative realism” also runs the risk of falling into a form of abstractionism in its attempts to defeat “correlationism.” Confrontation with the abstract, as the fixed and isolated, is a dominant theme in both categorical and non-categorical speculative philosophy.

Donald Verene’s *Speculative Philosophy* is one of the few recent books in which the

phrase is actually used in the title. It is not a work of systematic philosophy in the classical sense of Proclus, Kant, or Hegel. It is a series of essays on a wide range of topics of interest to the speculative thinker such as “Absolute Knowledge and Philosophical Language,” and “The Limits of Argument: Argument and Autobiography.” Verene critiques the wholesale immersion in critical thinking that is characteristic of modern philosophy or what Vico would call the “barbarism of refinement.”²⁴ Arguments are certainly the stock in trade of professional philosophers, but they become barbaric and corrupted when they displace the love of wisdom. Speculative philosophy brings forth narratives as well as canonic principles. Verene’s paradigmatic speculative philosopher is Giambattista Vico, but he also deploys G.W.F. Hegel, Ernst Cassirer and James Joyce in his reflections on the nature of speculative thought. These writers are for him a modern philosophical tetrad.²⁵

Speculative philosophy, in Verene’s view, always tries to distinguish itself from ordinary science. Failure to recognize that this is even an issue is the great failing of analytical philosophy. Of all the sciences and human studies, the *Naturwissenschaften* and the *Geisteswissenschaften*, philosophy is the discipline that does the most to preserve itself.²⁶ It attempts to do this through a wide range of stratagems. Speculative thought must be self-generating with respect to its own content. It cannot admit of the possibility of extraneous refutation. It usually views the historical civilization in which it finds itself, and other human endeavours, as chaotic and in decline. Humanity, and the preservation of life generally, needs speculative philosophy to survive. It is often the fluid and indeterminate answer to wide ranging cultural critique. Speculative philosophy perennially gives us absolutes and then undermines those absolutes. It enters into all sorts of alliances with various languages, with poets, mathematicians, and other denizens of the “philosophical imaginary.”²⁷ When those languages invariably fall short of the demands of speculative philosophy, the linguistic alliance is abrogated and the ineffable once again takes primacy over all things.

Verene, taking up a theme from Hegel, notes that metaphysical systems are never really abandoned. Like myths, speculative metaphysics responds to two ever present requirements of the human condition.²⁸ One is the need to comprehend the whole. The other is to understand opposition and paradox, and their dynamical interrelation, within that whole. In the speculative tradition these problems are re-interpreted and refined over many centuries. A significant work of speculative metaphysics is never really refuted, unlike a scientific principle, which is by definition vulnerable to revision or falsification. A speculative system of philosophy circumscribes the conditions under which principles are possible. Its language referents often change with time and place. Sometimes it is abandoned out of sheer fatigue. Maybe it was a matter of exhaustion, or perhaps mercy, rather than theological dogma, that compelled the Emperor Justinian to shut down Plato’s Academy in 529AD and scatter the ponderous Scholarchs across the plains of Anatolia and Syria.

James Bradley anchors the meaning of the “speculative” in large questions about the nature of existence as such.

Speculative philosophy characteristically defends a strong theory of existence,

while other kinds of philosophy strenuously defend a weak theory. So fundamental is the difference between strong and weak theories of existence to any account we may give of the nature of things that the debate between them lies at the very heart of philosophy.²⁹

There is a distinction, on Bradley's view, between metaphysics and doing philosophy *speculatively*. A weak theory of existence is content with quantitative and qualitative statements of the sort that "for some x, x is a horse," or "there are five chairs in the room." Existential statements are thus exclusively descriptive. They can be the domain of metaphysics only in a very limited way. For example, in the way that modern philosophers of the brain are satisfied with biological or epiphenomenal descriptions of mental activity. Non-speculative, descriptive metaphysics is satisfied with existence statements as instantiated predicates. Contemporary philosophies of cognition and language thus understand themselves as doing metaphysics, but cannot be said to be doing philosophy *speculatively*.

Speculative philosophy, on the other hand, is not satisfied with weak existence statements. It is concerned with why anything exists at all, or why consciousness appears in nature, or why we ask purposive questions. Speculative philosophers focus on actuality, or existence in the active sense. Speculative thought participates actively in its self-explanatory principles and such self-participation is seen as leading to a strong, or stronger, theories of existence than anything a weak theory of existence could envisage. The putative ultimates of descriptive metaphysics are viewed by speculative philosophy as myopic and delimited, and thus open to further inquiry and derivation.

The idea of seriality, in triadic or other forms, is crucial to nineteenth and twentieth century speculative philosophy. The defence by speculative philosophy of a strong theory of existence has at its core, according to Bradley, the concept of series or seriality. It is within the purview of modern serial theory that the great speculative philosophers of our time - Peirce, Bergson, Heidegger, Whitehead, go from a subjective to an objective theory.³⁰ For example, Heidegger moves from subjective temporalisation as tense-order to "the event" (*das Ereignis*) as an objective theory of actualisation with a trinitarian structure. With Heidegger, on Bradley's view, this leads to a radical critique of traditional speculative philosophy in terms of the synthesizing subject triadically actualised in the artist, artwork, and audience, and in philosophical representation and method.³¹ Bradley proposes to characterize speculative philosophy as "an immanentist analysis which allows the rational freedom of self-conscious agent-subjects to be defined as a complex instance of the universal freedom of serial activity."³² This is why speculative reason will always attend the funeral of its gravediggers.

Speculative philosophy thus affirms existence in some ultimate sense. It is not rendered speechless by the question as to why things should exist rather than not exist. For instance, a strong direct realist tradition can be detected in speculative philosophy since Kant's "Refutation of Idealism" in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.³³ It would therefore be incorrect to categorize speculative philosophy as fundamentally idealistic. In *The Science of Logic*, Hegel protests vehemently against the pervasive and one-sided oppositional categorization

of “realist” versus “idealist.”³⁴ Philosophers outside of the speculative tradition always try to pigeon-hole it in terms of the realist/idealist divide. Speculative philosophers in turn vehemently resist the classification.

In the twentieth century the opposition between the absolute idealists and the common sense philosophers mostly centred on the doctrine of internal relations. For example, G.E. Moore’s anti-idealism would be an example of James Bradley’s characterization of descriptive metaphysics as a weak theory of existence. To have a sensation or to be “aware of anything,” to use Moore’s language, is already to be outside the self-referential circle of our own ideas and sensations. The “descriptive metaphysics” of analytical philosophy, and the desire to avoid self-referentiality, is a popular motif in professional philosophizing in Anglo-American culture.

Idealists, on the other hand, maintain that it is conceptually impossible to be outside of one’s ideas and sensations, and that a direct realist account of cognition is simply an incoherent absolute presupposition that Collingwood would have quickly situated historically. Moore’s epistemology attempts to side-step the alembic of the Cartesian *cogito* and this puts him back in the camp of Kant’s particular combination of direct realism *and* an ineliminable subjective representationalism.³⁵ These types of enigmas are precisely what Moore, unsuccessfully, wished to avoid. Contrary to making objects the “truth makers,” idealists tend to make the subject, and the mental act, the arbiter of truth. For the most part, speculative thinkers endeavour to avoid both subjective and objective reductionism.

3. Some Debates and Controversies

Speculation and science appear to be irreconcilable world views. Historically, speculative philosophy has made strong claims to be scientific. Concomitantly, it is difficult to remove a speculative orientation from scientific endeavours, especially in the more “theoretical” sciences such as astrophysics, cosmology, or evolutionary biology. High level science frequently makes claims to be an all-inclusive theory that goes far beyond any particular existence-statements. When it does so, it runs the risk of going beyond the self-imposed borders of science. Kant created those borders *via* a transcendental metaphysics of reflection. For example, the appearance of a consciousness that recognizes purposiveness, or the original “spontaneous” appearance of life on the planet, are phenomena in scientific realism to be explained by the principles of natural selection and adaptation. There are no possible transcendent nodes in scientific law for which there cannot be an accounting. If there are, then science contradicts itself, and scientists will say that the argument has shifted to some other, non-scientific, realm of discourse.

Speculative thought often alleges that it is more scientific than empirical science. On the other hand it frequently offers something that is unsatisfying in terms of explanatory principles, illuminating proximate causes, or practical agendas. Such claims are grounded in a theory of totality in which all thought-positions are brought within the theory. J.N. Findlay called such exercises “absolute-theory,” in his *Matchette Lectures* of 1968. He defined an absolute-theory as “an intrinsically necessary, all-explanatory existent.”³⁶ Genuine speculative philosophy

discursively reveals itself and does not depend on some hidden metaphysic or invocation of a mystical first principle.

Can speculative philosophy, then, be understood as more than just an aspiration? Can it come to conclusions that are greater than just the acknowledgment that thought, human curiosity, and a restless spirit are simple facts buried in the dynamic of human ideas? Can philosophy itself move beyond *aporetics* and the conflict of the schools? Can the divergent philosophical dispositions toward wholeness and system, on the one hand, and piecemeal, parenthetic problem solving on the other be reconciled? Is reconciliation even a worthy ideal? Is a philosophical education and curriculum to be nothing but a series of discrete courses taken on a whim, or is it possible to be more *dirigiste* and integrative as speculative philosophy would like it to be?

Speculative thinking always appears youthful and naive because it responds to the impulse of consciousness to stand outside of consciousness and be the spectator who incessantly judges. For some this invariably leads to bad things and bad ideologies. To deny the impulse, however, inevitably chains the unrestrainable to the banal and uninspiring, to a low grade descriptive metaphysics. The Platonic love of wisdom, the divine Aphrodite's sway and allure, forever rebels against the hubris of Protagorean subjective-measure metaphysics or the pedestrian bonds of empirical science.

Speculative philosophy, though recurrently espousing conceptual rigour, often resists the inflection of a strict logic or the Euclidean demands of a propositional system. It is the peculiar idiom of the propositionally non-propositional, the vernacular of dogmatic scepticism, and the lingo of the doubting believer. Using quasi-Kantian, quasi-Hegelian language, the argument would go something like this. Abstractly stated, the speculative is the harmonious, the unified, and that which is most complete. It is the most conclusive, least tentative, most demanding, and least fanciful. The speculative contains and pervades the polarities, disunities, and oppositions of analyticized intellectual and natural life. As imaginative, spontaneous thought, it is the beginning and wellspring of all human creativity. As rational system, it is the culmination of all human labour and practised effort. The task of philosophy in the present is to recapture and freely develop trans-temporal speculative truth by contextualizing and delimiting the counter-speculative directions of modern intellectual life. This is an agenda-setting, truth-making philosophy that clashes stridently with the cautious, one thing at a time, approach of contemporary textbook philosophizing. Yet it employs the genuine dialectic of the Phileban gods and is resolute in the face of any argument.

Even discussions of *speculative philosophy*, such as this encyclopaedic survey, are inherently assumptive since they approach the content of philosophy from the standpoint of an already completed voyage through its categories and various determinations, or from a perspective which supposes that mind is to a degree self-transcendent. Externally, but non-philosophically, issues such as "emergent consciousness" or "natural teleology" are driven by scientific advances and not by some internal process of content-formation within the discipline of speculative philosophy itself. This means that speculation as opinion has been superseded in the speculative development of thought itself and is therefore sufficiently free to

discover for itself the full content of the discipline of philosophy. This in itself is controversial within the current context since philosophy as mere critical thinking is understood as having no content of its own. As thus restrictively self-conceived, philosophy is the most indeterminate of all disciplines - the discipline which is the most empty of thought. For the speculative philosopher this is the principal reason why philosophy has become so marginalized in the modern academy.

4. Related Disciplines and Recent Developments

The speculative has been used to describe a number of distinct sub-disciplines in philosophy as well as theology. Speculative systems of history have had a long and robust history until recently. They are normally called philosophies of history and are to be distinguished from histories of philosophies. Some philosophers, such as Hegel and Schelling, have written in both areas. Philosophies of history as universal histories are as old as St. Augustine's Judeo-Christian theodicy portrayed in *The City of God*, to Bossuet's providentially ordered design, to the human perfectibility doctrines of Voltaire and Condorcet, to Hegel's developmental history of consciousness and *Geist*, and to the more radical phenomenological historicisms of J.G. Droysen, F.H. Bradley, and Wilhelm Dilthey in the late nineteenth century.³⁷ Speculative systems of history are generally distinguished from scientific approaches to the topic, which are the stock in trade of the professional historian. Nonetheless, it can be argued that the empirical historian is always in search of a law or pattern of some sort in history. The law of progress in Auguste Comte's famous three stages of human history is paradoxically teleological and speculative in that it postulates the scientific age as the endgame, after the ages of theology and metaphysics. There is an ineluctable pattern to how humanity gets to the scientific stage. It is a clichéd argument that empirical data must be made intelligible within some framework and must invoke some set categories. Philosophers of history deal with the thorny issues of whether there are such things as dispassionate observers, value-free modes of inquiry, and identifiable rhythms to civilizations.

The standard classifications of speculative philosophies of history are circular, linear, and sometimes circular/linear, as is the case with Vico's *corsi* and *ricorsi*. Linear speculative systems of history are usually teleological and describe some type of progress, trend, or tendency in human history, either intellectually or in terms of historical events. Sometimes the teleology is regressive or devolutionary, as one finds in Heidegger's *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, where Western philosophical history from Plato onwards is seen as a falling away from the original Pre-Socratic insights into Being.³⁸ Circular philosophies of history, though somewhat less common within a Christian context, tend to deal with the rise and fall of civilizations, such as one finds in Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History*. The explanations for why cultures come and go can be exogenous, such as famines or climatic disasters, or endogenous, like economic collapse or political strife.

Speculative theology has held a longstanding place in the curricula of theological faculties. It can be loosely defined as the attempts to discover new insights into the truths of faith

by applying human reason to divine revelation. In this sense speculative theology is traceable to the later medieval arguments with respect to how faith seeks understanding, as one finds in St. Anselm's writings. His ontological argument or proof for the existence of God is the *locus classicus* for the interrelation between faith and the intellect. The ontological argument in many ways captures the ultimate speculative metaphysical problematic - how can existence or being be predicated of a supremely transcendent, perfect God, the *ens realissimum*? If this form of intellection or rational understanding of the nature of God is endemic to theology, even negative or apophatic theology, then it can be said that all theology involves some degree of speculation.

Finally, there is a movement in contemporary philosophy called "speculative realism," although a dispute has arisen about whether it is a movement at all.³⁹ This philosophy is primarily directed against what it calls "correlationism" and post-Kantian philosophy. The main component in the dominant forms of idealism in contemporary philosophy are intrinsically anthropocentric since they privilege the human being or mental activity over everything else. Correlationism is based on the view that human beings can only have access to the *correlation* between thinking and being, and never to either term apart from the other. Weak correlationists would be Kant and Husserl, while strong correlationists are Heidegger and Wittgenstein.

Speculative materialism, associated with the work of Quentin Meillassoux, is another term that has been developed in recent years. He wishes to return to Hume through a bolstered principle of factuality.⁴⁰ In the object-oriented philosophy of Graham Harman we have a return to Pepper's view of the world that all things are objects. Chairs and tables, as much as propositional attitudes or the constitutions of a nation, all have objective status, and that goes for things physical as well as fictional. Harman uses the term "speculative psychology," to refer to the sort of panpsychism that also appealed to C.D. Broad. The hylozoism of the classical Greeks comes to mind when there is talk of the psychic realities of earthworms and stones. With speculative realism, and its tendency towards universal reification, it now seems as if the term "speculative" can be used to describe anything. Some would undoubtedly say that *that* is the end of any meaningful employment of the term.

5. Conclusion

This survey of "speculative philosophy" illustrates that it is one of the more abiding and controversial terms in philosophy. Its strong claims for comprehensiveness and irrefutability have often engendered reactions which resulted in wholesale changes in intellectual world-view, conceptual optics, and their accompanying linguistic re-orientations. Equally, speculative philosophy has had a history of common themes and a trans-cultural endurance that few other schools or traditions in philosophy have been able to emulate. Speculative philosophy is the primary engine in the history of philosophy for critical challenges to dominant thought-systems. It is also the repository for many irreplaceable thought-referents and lasting categories despite attempts to erect non-categorical philosophies, even though the latter may be described in disciplinary surveys as speculative.

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1. F.W.J. Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, tr. Andrew Bowie, (Cambridge,

Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 134 - 163. Hegel early in his career critiqued Schelling's "identity philosophy." See G.W.F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, trs. H.S. Harris and Walter Cerf, (Albany, SUNY Press, 1977). This volume contains an informative introductory essay by Walter Cerf, "Speculative Philosophy and Intellectual Intuition: An Introduction to Hegel's *Essays*," pp. xi - xxxvi.

2. Borden Parker Bowne, *Metaphysics*, (New York, American Book Company, 1898), p. 1.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 421. Bowne actually liked to characterize his philosophy historically as a Kantianized Berkeleianism, p. 423. He also calls it objective idealism and phenomenal reality.

4. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, (New York, Macmillan, 1978), p. 3.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 17.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 339.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 349.

8. Bertrand Russell, *A History of Philosophy*, (London, Unwin, 1946), pp. 618 - 622. Some argue the distinction is more recent, see, Andreas Vrahimis, "Was There a Sun Before Men Existed," *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy*, Vol. 1, No. 9 (2013).

9. C.D. Broad, "Some Methods of Speculative Philosophy," *Aristotelian Society Supplement* 21 (1947), p. 3.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 15 - 18.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

13. R. J. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics*, (Chicago, Gateway, 1972), Chap. II, "No Science of Pure Being," pp. 11 - 16.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

17. Stephen Pepper, *World Hypotheses*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1970), p. 1.

18. The problems presented by such competing schools were well known in antiquity. The later Sceptics, for instance, such as Agrippa, viewed "discrepancy" as one of the five basic tropes or modes which lead to "suspension" or the "epochē." See, Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of*

Pyrrhonism, tr. R.G. Bury, (Harvard, Loeb Classical Library, 1967), Bk. I, 164, pp. 95, *et seq.*

19. Pepper, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 96 - 114.

22. *Ibid.*, Part Two, "The Relatively Adequate Hypotheses," pp. 141 - 314.

23. *Ibid.*, "Scheme of World Hypotheses," p. 146.

24. Donald Phillip Verene, *Speculative Philosophy*, (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), p. ix.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. xv - xxv,

26. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

27. Michèle Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary*, tr. Colin Gordon (California, Stanford University Press, 1990). There are many types of universals in speculative philosophy from Vico's imaginative universal, to Hegel's concrete universal, to the luminous universals produced by reflective judgments in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, recognized from Hegel onwards as Kant's most speculative work and by Kant himself as the crowning achievement of his philosophy.

28. Verene, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

29. James Bradley, "Transformations in Speculative Philosophy," *The Cambridge History of Philosophy 1870 - 1945*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 438 - 448.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 440 - 441.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 442 - 444.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 448.

33. The classical counter-argument, aimed at Berkeley's idealism and the *esse is percipi* principle, would be G.E. Moore's "The Refutation of Idealism," in *Philosophical Studies*, (New Jersey, Littlefield Adams, 1968), pp. 1 - 30. Platonists remembering well the Platonic analysis of the "paradox of analysis" in such dialogues as *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, and *Philebus* would find the whole debate between Moore and the British Idealists *déjà vu*. Apart from the misinterpretation of Kant's "Refutation of Idealism" in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Moore's own Refutation is more idealistic than he seems prepared to admit, although he is remarkably vacillating on the identity/difference problematic. For refutations of Moore's Refutation, see, Lawrence Lazarus, "Does Moore Succeed in Refuting Idealism?" *Academia*, 2007

[www.academia.edu/694999/Does Moore succeed in refuting Idealism](http://www.academia.edu/694999/Does_Moore_succeed_in_refuting_Idealism) (Accessed, August,

2015).

34. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, tr. A.V. Miller, (New York, Humanities Press, 1969), pp. 154 - 156. Hegel states that the opposition of idealism and realism has no philosophical significance on the basis of his position that the finite has no veritable being.

35. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 30, where he misreads Kant's careful distinction between intuitional *Vorstellungen* and something permanent in one's existence. His later attempts to prove the existence of an external world would have been helped by a more careful consideration of Kant's own "Refutation of Idealism."

36. J.N. Findlay, *Ascent to the Absolute*, (New York, Humanities Press, 1970), "Three Lectures on Absolute-Theory," pp. 17 - 77.

37. Francis K. Peddle, "The Phenomenological Historicism of Droysen, Bradley and Dilthey," *Eleutheria*, Vol. VIII, No. 1, (Ottawa, Institute of Speculative Philosophy, Spring, 1996).

38. Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, tr. Ralph Manheim, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1959).

39. See the Wikipedia entry on Speculative Realism and also Speculative Materialism.

40. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, tr. Ray Brassier, (London, Continuum, 2008), p. 90.