After Archimedes: Archimedes, Historicity, and Holism

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(Draft—please do not circulate without permission)
This essay’s ultimate concern is history. It aims to introduce a relatively new way of thinking about history—historicity—through a relatively new way of thinking about language: holism. A good place to start, and a recurrent reference point, is Archimedes, and, in particular, his famous claim that given a lever and a place to put it he could move the earth.¹ A distinct oddity of this phrase’s subsequent invocations, of talk of an “Archimedean point,” is that it refers not to a spatial, but to a temporal or historical displacement—often, to the coming to pass of an unprecedented event. Reference to Archimedes’ proclamation describes an occurrence that could not be envisioned or anticipated beforehand, as it alters the whole of that time or history in which it purportedly occurs. Such an event, at once belonging and not to historical time, is figured through Archimedes’ proposed displacement of space: through a levering of that field in which all human motions usually take place, from a point not within it, not found upon the globe.

So understood, the Archimedean point as figure of the event connects to recent critical history—specifically, to developments that I will here denote as “the three posts”: postmodernism, postcolonialism, and, less familiar, the post-critical. All of these stances, which together speak to the terrain on which much of the humanities has moved in the last thirty years, while doubtless quite different from one another, refer back to such an Archimedean event: each maintains that it responds to a historical transformation that renders history radically different and which is thus itself not completely housed within historical time.

The postmodern designates a loss of historical context, a failure of the historical vantage point to encompass our own situation—a forgetting, as Fredric Jameson puts it,
of our own “historicity” (Jameson 1991, x). So understood, postmodernity invokes a change in relation to history as a whole, one that also somehow takes place through it or within it—accordingly, designating an event of an “Archimedean” order. Jameson, unlike some other postmodernists, in fact proposes to work backwards. He seeks to follow such an Archimedean event back into time, back into that history from which it must have somehow emerged, with the hope of undoing its more displacing effects. Yet even Jameson’s version of the postmodern presupposes an occurrence taking place at an Archimedean point—at once both in and out of history—since his approach, his cognitive mapping, works forward from its effects to a more global historical diagnosis of our present.

Similarly, postcolonialism envisions a transformation of history as a whole, one related in part to circumstances that Jameson himself identifies: the unchecked spread of capitalism, eventually into spheres from which it formerly was absent, such as agriculture and high and popular culture. Postcolonialism further insists, however, on the radical asymmetry of this transformation; it affirms that the rise and subsequent expansion of capitalism proves inseparable from the colonial enterprises of Europe and the global north and their consequences. Such dissymmetry renders suspect all the concepts of history, it is claimed; the entire historiographical framework proves collusive with, and implicated in this dissymmetry. Postcolonialism thus questions the very possibility of history and historiography on the basis of an event necessarily not fully capturable within it. While Jameson wishes to salvage the historical bulwark in the face of an Archimedean event that threatens to overtake it, postcolonialism’s Archimedeanism calls into doubt
history and historiography on the basis of a happening that it necessarily both questions and affirms.

Finally, the postcritical, the least familiar and most current of these terms— which encompasses such developments as surface reading, flat ontology, and speculative realism, while here being associated preeminently with the writings of Bruno Latour—rejects accounts of radical historical discontinuity. It refuses historical grand narratives, most notably appeals to modernity, while redescribing our situation—writing the history of science and of the West otherwise—in part in response to this same change or some form of it. The postcritical thus retains sous rature the discontinuity it contests. What motivates its own reconstructions is a transformation of some kind that, in Latour’s case, he himself dates to the seventeenth century, even as this break is said no longer to exist or be recognizable as such (Latour 1993, 30). This stance, too, thus invokes an Archimedean point. The postcritical’s insertion into time and history takes place under the aegis of an event—or nexus of events—on which it reckons, even as it declares that these never properly took place as such.

All these instances thus situate themselves in the aftermath of an event, while denying the terms on which this event can be conceived. A happening determines the moment or period that these attempts occupy and the task they set for themselves, while somehow also remaining foreign to historical time and its standard conceptualization, in a movement that simultaneously defines and defies history. These three posts thus can all be figured through Archimedes’ leveraging of the globe, through his seemingly impossible transposition of the whole of lived space from a point absent from it that nevertheless operates within it.
By contrast, historicity, conceived along the relatively unique lines envisioned here, removes itself from such Archimedean scenarios, while still aiming to capture some of their force. Historicity affirms numerous discrete lines or strands of history, multiple traditions—were this term not itself misleading—without any greater whole, any more comprehensive totality comprehending them. Instead, each historico-temporal strand exists thanks to being oriented by a (present and future) problem: the status of scientific experimentation, the justness of representative government, the ascent to office of the current US president, etc. So conceived, none of these inquiries has any inherent relation to any of the others: the invention of the calculus, for example, has no connection with the absolute monarchies under which it occurs. In some cases, to be sure the intersections of two or more strands may prove decisive (such as those of industrialization and the introduction of paper currency), but even here, the schema of the period, of a pre-existing whole, is not invoked.

A now well-known thesis of Reinhart Koselleck can assist in making clearer the precise force of this innovation upon current historical thinking. Koselleck, in his encyclopedia entry, “Geschichte,” contends that a specifically modern notion of history—effectively, that of History with a capital H—emerges between 1750 and 1850. While formerly, numerous histories had been penned (of battles, inventions and so on), in which what happened—Geschichte, res gestae—was distinguished from its telling—Historie, historia rerum gestarum—according to Koselleck, there subsequently arose one single History, in which all occurrences in advance were included, time alone now a force constitutive of history as such. As so conceived, History grounds the intelligibility of everything that can occur in the totality that it itself provides. At once “a reality concept”
and “a reflexive concept,” as Koselleck puts it, with such History the significance of each development recurs to its place in the whole, thereby making primary the period or age, understood as slices or segments of itself. In sum, as many of us still believe today, History encompasses in advance everything that can and does occur, occurrences which take on their own ultimate significance from their place within such History.

By contrast, what these three posts indicate, what this series of Archimedean events suggests—a thesis with which on its own terms historicity concurs—is that this conception, History, as tracked by Koselleck, has ceased to be a workable notion. Such all-encompassing History, within which all that happens is included in advance, and which thus yields, among other things, a mass of historical facts that presses down upon “the average man” as “does the weight of air,” as Louis Althusser once put it, no longer is usable as either an epistemic or an ontological framework.

Historicity, like these three posts, indeed denies such a relation to history en bloc; it deems such historical constructions not viable. Yet historicity does so, it must be quickly added, not on historical grounds, not in the form of an event that somehow takes place in this same medium suddenly become questionable, but owing to the intellectual inadequacy, the non-veridicality of this notion. These “three posts,” these alternative treatments of history harbor within them an Archimedean point and an Archimedean event, precisely because all three assume that this departure from History somehow also comes about through it, that this leavetaking takes shape as an occurrence within (while also departing from) one and the same form of historical time. In all three posts, the current epoch, our time, is viewed as beyond History, even as this very displacement refers back to this same Historical framework.
The period, as applied to our own time, is itself almost always understood in these terms—by postmodernism, postcriticism, and the postcolonial; its characteristic as a period is to have fallen away from history thanks to an Archimedean event or transformation itself at least in part situated within history. Thus, Latour, to whom I will here confine myself, invokes just this notion of the period when motivating a recent version of his project. In “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?: From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” he declares that “there is no greater intellectual crime than to address with the equipment of an older period the challenges of the present one” (Latour 2004, 231). Latour, who elsewhere wants no longer to be modern in regard to knowing generally, and who thus places the chromatograph on the same level as the shaman’s cotton ball, appeals, when it comes to his own stance, to a specifically modern form of history stemming from that same Enlightenment that he contests.

Latour’s invocation of the period to situate his own program, moreover, is no mere slip (though he has questioned this notion when applied to the subjects he treats on other occasions). In this same piece, deeming his own position “nonmodern,” he places it in a straightforward sequence of developments, stipulating that it comes after the modern and the post (Latour 2004, 227n4; 236). In similar fashion, the title of his best known work, We Have Never Been Modern, through its use of the pluperfect maintains this framework and his work’s place within it, while also questioning it. Its title negates not the present (we are not modern), nor even the past (we weren’t modern), but what is already an interpretation of the past, a past of the past, thereby solidifying his intervention’s appearance in a sequence of pasts, which indeed, as in Koselleck’s
History (Koselleck’s *Geschichte*), for Latour, as for the Enlightenment itself, thus proves not only a means, but the primary means for humanity’s self-direction; it indicates what critical tools are appropriate, even as, within this analysis, this same conception at times comes into question. This is true, moreover, in all three of these posts. All evince interpretations of our time, all draw on this notion of the period, to orient themselves in respect to our own situation, even as they otherwise question (or claim to find put into question) the framework of history as a whole.

My contention, however, is that there is not, nor indeed ever was such a place to take a stand: no historical ground, no unified and sequential time, no periods nor their succession to provide such world-historical orientation—no comprehensive contemporaneity of the present as such, nor of the past itself from which to invoke the future and judge what is needed now, to decide what world-historical steps at present are to be taken. Given the Archimedean figure of the historical event that surfaces in such self-appraisals, it indeed must be questioned whether the navigation through new worlds or aspects of the world that so many of us rightfully seek can be conceived through this framework. This inadequacy of the concept of History to perform what it is called upon to do, is also affirmed, of course, by all three of these “posts,” in other phases of their thinking.

II

Historicity, as here employed, thus signals a new way to model history and historical insertion. A new model of *language* and *discourse*, holism, accompanies this
revision and assists in its articulation. Before turning to holism’s formulation by way of reference to Latour’s project and to contemporary philosophy of language, in order to identify the precise subject matter, the topic within this work that holism ultimately concerns, I wish to pause briefly alongside another phase of the Archimedean legend: his death.

As recounted by Plutarch, Archimedes’ death proves to be the counterpoint of his life, insofar as it brings home not the possible sublimity of theory and knowing (as in the lever tale), but the force of theory’s putative opposite: practice—and not just the force of praxis in general, but of its primary instance, the political. The same Archimedes who purportedly moves the world, who is somehow able to occupy a place that is no place, indeed finds himself brought “down to earth” in death. Having conjured with transcendence and removed himself from the world, the world and the practical sphere take their revenge in the form of the Roman centurion who famously slays Archimedes on the beach while in the midst of working on his mathematical models.

Given the grandeur, or to other eyes, perhaps grandiosity, of Archimedes’s response to the soldier’s orders to move—his famous retort: “do not disturb my circles”—the moral of Plutarch’s story is in fact ambiguous. Read in the way just suggested, Archimedes’ death proves a classic tragedy, a tale of theory’s hubris requited. The same story may also suggest radical affirmation and a refusal of all nay-saying, however: a depiction of the theorist, or her interests, as reaching beyond all mortality, even at the last immersed in a potentially infinite and thus death-defying object.

Whatever moral one chooses, however, what is important is precisely what opens this scene to both readings: the tenuousness of the space of theory as such, here
represented by Archimedes’ diagrams, his circles in sand. The soldier, of course, does not see these figures, and, at the moment of death, theory and practice across this invisible threshold stare past one another. So understood, Archimedes’ murder thus foregrounds the problem of the space of theorein, of the body of knowledge. Does this body, the space of scientific and mathematical inscription, possess special properties or values of its own? Does a specific register or aspect of discourse exist—such as that Husserl, and at times, Derrida, call ideality—upon which knowledge and science rely, which permits the constitution of scientific objects and the discourses in which they are embedded?

Now, of course, Latour—to whose project, I should be clear, I am in many ways sympathetic—has in fact done much, and certainly much more than I, to rework and rethink this very space. Science studies is dedicated to reconceiving and opening up what has traditionally been taken as the milieu of knowledge, theory, thought, and discovery. Latour’s program, as his own treatment of the Archimedean point makes clear, denies that science and theory have a space or register peculiar to them, any special point d’appui in language or anywhere else, even as at the same time, it refuses to subordinate their work to any pregiven template of the social or the practical.

Latour’s assemblages, his networks, or, as he more recently puts it, his “matters of concern,” thus, like holism, press in the direction of a new more open, and indeed more worlded, construal of knowing, of science, theory and thought. Latour and holism both reject the notion that theory, knowledge, or scientific objectivity have a proper space or medium, a resource specific to them, within or apart from language and discourse. In Latour’s more pragmatist and materialist account even the realm of discourse taken as identifiable as such, to say nothing of the constitutive power of meaning, which in
Husserlian phenomenology makes possible the constitution of scientific objects and truths, ceases to play any role.

Similarly, a holistic approach to discourse and signification contests the belief that language, meaning, and signification can provide a ground for knowledge or truth. As pioneered in Heidegger’s early work, in Wittgenstein’s later writings, or in the version offered by the Anglophone philosopher Donald Davidson, holism insists that word and world are always so intertwined, speech and what it is about always so woven together, that the identity of the former can never be conceived or secured apart from the latter. Words, meanings, signs, and the symbolic, unable to be isolated in themselves, can also, accordingly, never supply the grounds or foundations of what is or what is known, even though the latter also would not appear as and what it is without the former.

Wittgenstein, in his Philosophical Investigations in his usual lapidary style, puts his finger on this unboundedness (and thus non-grounding capacity) of language, when he discusses what some call the “dictionary meaning” of words. “If language is to be a means of communication,” he asserts, “there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments” (88e; para #242).

Wittgenstein insists if we are to use language at all, we must not only agree about what words mean (definitions), but how they work in the world: the things—facts, states of affairs, wishes, fictions, and so on—to which they relate (judgments). Words’ meanings and signs’ signification are thus subordinate to greater wholes or contexts involving practices and things, that Wittgenstein calls forms of life, exemplified here by measurement. (“What we call ‘measuring,’ he concludes, “is partly determined by a
certain constancy in results of measurement,” by the outcomes at which this undertaking arrives amidst things.)

Accordingly, in light of considerations such as these, Davidson, in his late work, famously has declared that language does not exist at all, by which he means that either there is no actual set of conventions organizing a shared reservoir of signs and meanings, or, if there is such, these conventions finally have no explanatory value when it comes to language actually in use. No genuine rules, no existing conventions control the work done by words and signs in discourses, which are themselves at work in the world.

Latour, then, shares with holism these doubts about demarcation of thought from things, of contents from their contexts. An insight parallel to the latter organizes his own starting point when it comes to thinking about knowledge and its objects. Where they differ, however, is that Latour, while indeed joining with holism in rejecting the constitution of scientific knowledge and its objects thanks to meaning, language, discourse, signs, inscriptions or even documents (though he is clearly tempted by the last of these), and thus starting from an essentially holistic perspective in which science and society, objects and discourses about them are one, is nevertheless unwilling to give up, as holism does, an account, in principle general, of the appearance of these entities themselves—of scientific objects, theories, and their truths. While holism insists on world and word always being so intertwined such that there are only dispersed, multiple events of truth, ones that can be investigated in light of a further question or problem (through the workings of historicity), but about which there is nothing more necessarily to be said, Latour, even in his most recent work, wishes to defend a version of what he himself explicitly deems a version of constructivism: an epistemological and ontological stance
that gives a footing for accounts or depictions or redescriptions of the emergence of scientific objects and knowledges in general.\textsuperscript{6}

So doing, the problem Latour encounters, however, is that the holistic standpoint from which he begins inevitably comes into conflict with the terms of his actual analysis, leaving fundamentally undecided the specific interrelation between knowledge and truth, society and scientific objectivities. Playing off a version of this holistic insight—indeed starting, as he puts it, from content and context together (a stance with which the Wittgenstein of the above quotation or the early Heidegger could only agree)—Latour retreats from this standpoint—or, better, he both does and does not retreat, since he at once ultimately both denies and recognizes the irreducibility of truth, the radicality of the event of truth which for holism defies further explanation and grounding.

Latour, while insisting on constructivism, has come to reject “social constructivism,” claiming not to privilege society and instead beginning from the actual interactivity, the always already being together of science and society, knowledge and things. Nevertheless, his concrete analyses, inevitably (from the point of view of holism) swing back and forth between the two stances that he believes that he has in principle already overcome: between a) a specifically social construction of the findings of science, by way of interests and prestige, and b) an alternative moment when these discoveries are granted a singular force, and thus an independence of their own, in which their excess over the social as existing comes to be registered as such.

To be sure, Latour views these two phases as ultimately complementary: the discovery, truth, takes place thanks to, not in spite of, the social stage setting. Yet this is but one of two competing accounts Latour gives, which as presented by him are also
asserted to be ultimately mutually exclusive. Thus in *The Pasteurization of France*, Latour insists his constructivism is merely *additive*, thereby embracing the complementarity of science and society, thought and things. There he claims, while detailing Pasteur’s discoveries in the lab, that the only further “qualification” he would introduce “consists merely of *adding* network building” (his own emphasis). And, in this same note, he himself explicitly affirms that “microbes are indeed out there and discovered” (Latour 1998, 93n29). Social stage-setting, accordingly, here merely *accompanies* the discovery of some truth.

By contrast, further on in his account, Latour denies precisely the foreignness, the alterity or excessiveness of truth that registers in his own concession that microbes are indeed “out there.” He now insists that “nothing ever comes from outside,” and, going on to gloss this claim, he falls back on a thoroughly social explanation of such discoveries, stipulating that “a group…re-engender(s) the outside from within its own interests and wishes” (Latour 1998, 126). This assertion, tracing back *without remainder* the “outside” of discovery to already existing interests and wishes (Latour’s reference here is to the medical establishment’s reception of Pasteur’s findings) reconsolidates an entirely social explanation. Interests and wishes have complete explanatory power—Latour thus taking back what was conceded above. Thus two considerations (stage-setting and truth) are sometimes viewed by Latour as additive or complementary, at other times as mutually exclusive.

In part under the pressure of contemporary developments (such as climate-change denial), Latour himself has become more sensitive to this tension in his work, more aware of the uneasy status of what he now calls his own “realism.” His more recent “Why Has
Critique Run Out of Steam?” in part aims to address this issue. There, he proclaims, “as long as we have not sealed the leaks, the realist attitude will always be split, matters of fact take the best part, and matters of concern are limited to a rich but essentially void or irrelevant history” (Latour 2004, 243).

Latour in this text thus proposes to resolve this problem, to seal the leak and rehabilitate his own “constructivism” (which in a companion article devoted to this topic he ultimately deems a compositionalism, in effect repeating the same ambiguity). Yet his procedure merely displaces this tension, rather than resolving it. For, to seal this gap, Latour in effect repeats an impulse that has long been his: he appeals to ontology or metaphysics, in this instance that of Whitehead. Metaphysics, he insists, citing the latter, “blows up the whole arena” (Latour 2004, 244).7

Such recourse—the precise opposite of holism’s, which indeed not only rejects any further account of truth and its objects (scientific or otherwise), but argues against the very possibility of metaphysics—ultimately entails that Latour’s own scheme merely displaces and repeats the above split. His own appeal to metaphysics lands Latour in a Kant-style account of the transcendental conditions of scientific knowledge and objects, though just this framework, of course, is also one that this essay in its very title (“Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”) militates against.

Nevertheless, that Latour’s metaphysics or ontology and its new terminology (of actant, networks, collections and so on) ends up, despite his own aims, operating as a set of transcendental conditions for scientific objects becomes perhaps most clear when Latour in this text has dealings with a holist still more radical than he: namely, Heidegger. Latour in “Why has Critique” invokes Heidegger as one who has already
charted an ontological or metaphysical recalibration similar to his own. When Heidegger addresses not the scientific object (Gegenstand) but the thing (das Ding), according to Latour, he offers a version of Latour’s approach to these same objects—the objects of natural science. “Heidegger, when he takes the jug seriously, offers a powerful vocabulary to also talk about the object,” Latour declares. “The object of science and technology, the Gegenstand,” he continues, thus should be spoken about “as if it had the rich and complicated qualities of the celebrated Thing” (Latour 2004, 234).

Latour, more specifically, sees in Heidegger’s notion of the gathering, of the thing as letting what Heidegger calls the fourfold manifest itself on its site, a version of his own conception of a scientific matter of concern. Yet not only is this a misunderstanding of Heidegger; as such, it proves revelatory of the character of Latour’s appeal to metaphysics. For, the fourfold for Heidegger, it must emphasized, is in no sense what lets a thing exist, some kind of esoteric scaffolding that permits objects or things to maintain themselves—to such an extent that Heidegger in the course of setting this notion out indeed imparts a way of existing of their own to things: namely, “thinging” (174). What is thought as participating in the thing—earth and sky, gods and human beings—itself arrives in such “thinging” and thus is not a metaphysical or transcendental ground. The thing, the jug (or, in a different way, the temple in “The Origin of the Work of Art”) for Heidegger instead furnishes a site for the appearance of what otherwise has no appearing of its own, not being a thing or a being. In the thing’s thinging, a manifesting comes to pass (or is configured or transcribed by Heidegger) with reference to Being, not beings. This occurrence pertaining to the register of Sein (Being) in no way accounts for, or grounds the thing as such, but, if anything, presupposes it.
Latour, however, understands the thing and his own matter of concern, according to a traditional transcendental framework. Collections, networks, show what make a thing “exist and…maintain its existence” (Latour 2004, 246). His view of things as matters of concern, he states, allows us “to detect how many participants are gathered in a thing to make it exist” (Latour 2004, 246). Accordingly Latour has reversed the direction of Heidegger’s treatment; he retranscendentalizes Heidegger, rendering his poetizing thinking a species of Kantian possibility conditions. What for Heidegger is a space of a unique sort of phenomenalization or manifestation, for Latour is instead a result. The thing or object, for Latour, is an effect that stands to what for Heidegger manifests itself on this site as to a ground.

Accordingly, the split within Latour’s realism now reappears as the difference between transcendental conditions—these new sorts of meta-contexts with their unprecedented vocabulary of network, agency, gathering, etc.—and these matters themselves. Falling short of the radicality of Heidegger’s holism, while sharing many of its premises, Latour indeed buys into a transcendentalism that reintroduces the split between a) what actually is, and b) our view of it, context and content, now in terms of a (transcendental) metastructuration (agents, networks, collections, forces, trials of strength, and so on) and its instances (microbes, viruses, and so forth).9

Indeed, appealing to such an unreconstructed ontology and metaphysics (unreconstructed in the sense of not having questioned the very standpoint of a metaphysics or ontology, no matter how striking or novel its contents otherwise may be), Latour trades on a classical “view from nowhere,” as does also his purported “anthropology of science.” Both metaphysics and anthropology retain the pretense that
we can jump out of our situation and rejigger our concepts pertaining to nature, understanding, and reality as a whole. Accordingly, for this reason, Latour explicitly includes his own undertaking within the Archimedean adventure in “Why Has Critique?” “Archimedes spoke for a whole tradition, when he exclaimed: ‘Give me one fixed point and I will move the Earth,’” Latour declares, “in turn give me one matter of concern,” he continues, “and I will show you the whole earth and heavens” (Latour 2004, 246).

Latour, despite his proclamation elsewhere that that “the battle to know what is happening …is endless” and that “we can never do better, we can never know more clearly” (Latour 1998, 147), indeed harbors his own Archimedean impulse. He deploys the Archimedean point, the classical view from nowhere, to reconfigure the relations between knowledge and its objects, science and society. Such appeals stand in sharp contrast, of course, to the thought of Heidegger, who makes both anthropology and metaphysics objects of explicit critique, on the basis of a far more radical holism and a new, unprecedented realism. Moving at once back behind and beyond the representationalism of Descartes, traces of which remained active in his teacher Husserl, Heidegger, like Wittgenstein, simultaneously affirms an inseparability of contexts and contents, while retrieving a fundamental notion of truth without recourse to any further explanatory mechanism, thus avoiding the fractures or slippages that constantly worry Latour in regard to his constructivist standpoint. Constructivism of any stripe, however, as Latour himself sometimes senses, can never finally overcome these splits between subjects and objects, contexts and contents that his work repeatedly encounters.

Yet having measured the distance between Heidegger and Latour on the realism that Latour believes they share, their genuine proximity, which Latour himself overlooks,
in respect to what might be called the ultimate matter of concern, also ought not go unnoticed. For Heidegger, did not stop at such holism; having sketched the limits of metaphysics and classical ontology, he leveraged this standpoint to give a new account, not of things or beings, but Being, with reference to the plane of the historial—to history, or better, to what might both at once occupy and exceed the traditional space of this category. His holism, permitting thinking to be disentangled from those forms and thoughts Heidegger believed were ultimately foreign to it (such as skepticism about things and other people), led him to envision a new mode of historial or historical thinking, keyed to the performativity of Being and the receptivity of poetry and thought from which, if anywhere, Heidegger believed healing of some kind could come: healing from the sort of technoscience that Latour in his very different way also takes to be his ultimate “matter of concern.” Indeed, Latour not only shares this concern in a far different register, but, like Heidegger, as his Archimedean appeal to metaphysics makes plain, he wishes to shift all in one go—to inaugurate a new epoch in our understanding of ourselves, our knowledge, our science and things, albeit in a fashion perhaps less philosophically sophisticated than his precursor.¹⁰

By contrast, historicity as here conceived, in affirming the non-viability of Geschichte in all its form, rejects not only Latour’s version, the demand for which stems from his reading of society and where we are now, but also Heidegger’s, which also proves still too beholden to the framework of History. Heidegger is arguably the most profound interrogator and greatest antagonist of modern historiography and its founding conceptions (Geschichte, the period), even as, in a novel way, he continues to stand under their shadow, as the ambiguity of an essay like his “The Age of the World Picture” makes
plain—an ambivalence also evident in perhaps the preeminent “historicophilosopher” of our own times (and not accidently one of Heidegger’s best readers): Michel Foucault.

Historicity as it is in the course of here being framed, however, steps back from even these sorts of multiplex negotiations with History. As such, in some respects, it stands closer to the approach of Heidegger’s student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, than to Heidegger’s own—albeit Gadamer’s distance from *Geschichte* also reaches a limit in a Hegelian rather than Heideggerean register, as will soon be clear.

Gadamer’s proximity to the stance here envisioned, moreover, allows one final closing problem to be addressed. For, Latour is doubtless right: even setting aside all appeals to the period—our own, or, for example, modernity—it remains urgent on a variety of sites to contest science’s common self-representations of its own knowledge and authority and its tendency to view its own results as impervious to further discussion. In light of concrete problems, concrete knots in which science, technoscience, research and our politics are tied—such as the management of nature, the end of life, contemporary medicine, the intelligence of machines, etc.—the desirability of an inquiry into science’s various findings, at once scientifically informed, yet conducted on different terms than those of these researches themselves and available to non-scientists, as pioneered by Latour and others in science studies, seems clear.

Does not, then, historicity risk lapsing into quiescence in the face of these developments, just as did the more traditional positivism—as the late Wittgenstein’s example, so pathbreaking in other respects, perhaps above all makes evident? Setting aside Heidegger’s talk of To Be and the Enframing, Latour’s irreductions, networks and collections—so removing its discussion from this scale of History and from any epochal
intervention—historicity and holism may leave science to its self-representations, to its various ivory towers, as is evident in W. V. O. Quine’s work and to a lesser degree that of Davidson.

Now, though Latour accuses Heidegger of overlooking the Object (Gegenstand), perhaps ironically, it is finally Heidegger’s student Gadamer—and not the later Heidegger at least—who takes this sort of denegating attitude toward scientific research; thereby Gadamer in his own way arrives at a result surprisingly close to that positivist tendency discernible in Anglophone holism. By contrast, Heidegger’s famous watchword on these matters—that the essence of technology is nothing technological—clearly signals that technoscience for him is ultimately an issue neither of the object (Gegenstand) nor of the thing (das Ding), but of the order of Being. Heidegger himself thus ultimately gives to these developments at the forefront of Latour’s concerns the highest standing in his own work.

Gadamer, however, in his own writings consistently downplays or leaps over the object of knowledge, the Gegenstand in its specificity, as critics from Leo Strauss to Jurgen Habermas have pointed out. One especially relevant instance where the subordinate status of the Gegenstand arises is in an interchange between Gadamer and his own erstwhile student, Koselleck, thus closing the circle by returning us to the work of the latter. In response to Koselleck’s attempt to separate history from Gadamer’s own hermeneutics and establish this field in its specificity as an object of knowledge or research, Gadamer insists on just that sort of secondary status of the Gegenstand of which Latour accuses Heidegger. Conceding to Koselleck that it is possible to use Heidegger’s work in a specifically transcendental mode (as did Latour himself, albeit here Koselleck
proceeds quite self-consciously), and thus make the former’s insights “basic concepts (Grundbegriffe) of an objectworld (Gegenstandswelt) and its knowledge,” Gadamer goes on to insist that Koselleck’s attempt lacks and indeed can never afford “legitimation of this interest in this Objectworld of history and of historical occurrences” (33).

Such objectivities as those in history (and by implication all other areas of research) are thus for Gadamer not philosophically primary. Gadamer, accordingly, leaves the Gegenstand overlooked or ultimately unaddressed in its specificity, just as Latour believed that Heidegger had done. Now, Gadamer is in fact persuasive in much of his response to Koselleck (as conceivably attested by Koselleck’s including Gadamer’s rebuttal on all those occasions when he has published his own essay). Moreover, I myself, to be clear, side with Gadamer in rejecting Geschicht and the methodology of the historian that Koselleck affirms. At the same time, Gadamer himself clearly lacks an account of the Gegenstand in its positivity and thus a response to the motives that legitimately drive Latour and science studies, as well as Heidegger in his late meditations on technology.

This lacuna is one with the limits of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, his version of historicity and holism, which is finally tributary to Gadamer’s overall humanism. Not only does the present context make this clear, as Gadamer further argues against Koselleck that the foundations of his history (which the latter largely borrows, without attribution, from Carl Schmitt) lacks an account of specifically human agency and history, and thus coincides with that of animals and the animal world. Moreover, and perhaps more centrally, the status of truth in Gadamer’s thought attests to this same humanism, and thus differs in important details with that being put forward here, even as
it remains close in other respects. While Gadamer is surely right that Koselleck misunderstands the role of *Sprachlichkeit* in Gadamer’s own philosophical hermeneutics, and that, as in holism, the perceived pervasiveness of discourse by no means entails a stopping point short of the real, nevertheless Gadamer’s insistence that truth emerges within the tradition through his now famous “fusion of horizons” neglects, or at least downplays the radical alterity of truth events that has here been affirmed (which on the current model in fact suspends any given tradition, even as it spurs it on, thereby imbuing it with its own historicity). Indeed, for Gadamer, truth, rather than an event foreign to time while taking place nowhere else, is instead wholly immanent to the tradition and its traditionality, as attested its being captured in such a fusion. Contrariwise, the tradition, as one and unitary, finds its identity repeatedly reenacted and performed through such coming to sight or speech of truth. Truth and the tradition, for Gadamer, are thus finally cofounding, both equally immanent to an hermeneutic exercise of understanding. Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics on this basis can thus explicitly avow a kinship with Hegel’s historical reason (while, its situating its *logos* in *dialogue* or conversation rather than in a strict logic or dialectic).

As conceived here, however, historicity rejects these more humanistic aspects of Gadamer’s thinking: both the immanence of truth (in favor of a still more radical self-dissimulating outside) and the singularity of tradition (for irredeemably multiple historical currents and strands). As such, historicity can thus also embrace the eruption of the *Gegenstand* in its various specificities in a manner that Gadamer’s treatment cannot. Issues pertaining to specific areas of research and their objects (Byzantine iconography, the quark, demographics and so forth) can and do find their place in this conception,
which is given over to individual streams and multiple traditions and never aggregates
them into any sort of whole, albeit they may intersect at points (and which do not wholly
or even at all necessarily preexist their investigation; as for example the self in certain
strands of Buddhist philosophy, in Averroes, and in Sartre’s early phenomenology).
Indeed, science studies, insofar as it itself pursues individual discoveries and problems in
some cases (as in certain treatments of contemporary physics or Hacking’s inquiry into
dolomite) may itself be seen to instantiate historicity as here understood.¹² Setting aside
the metaphysical trappings, and leaving out strictly social interests, affirming the findings
of science as at once radically contingent and also thoroughly true (as both holism and
Hacking do [72-73])—science studies’ own investigations potentially furnish instances of
historical inquiries that do just fine without History and are themselves everywhere
animated by an aim at truth.

At the same time, Gadamerean hermeneutics is correct to reject the research
model invoked by Latour and others (and the metaphysical and transcendental
standpoints that tend to accompany it, as found in Koselleck as well). While allowing for
multiple and more disruptive events, an essentially hermeneutic beginning can and must
be affirmed, indeed within Sprachlichkeit and a kind of textuality (the successor without
reserve to philosophy’s transcendental standpoint). Without beginning from any pre-
existing forms (such as networks, actants and so on), and never simply standing as a
discipline in its own right (or perhaps solely the discipline of literary studies taken in the
broadest possible sense), those investigations falling under the rubric of historicity by no
means confine themselves to texts or ultimately stop short of things and truth. Holism’s
interimbrication of discourse and what is, beliefs and the world, allows for the discourse
side of the stick to be taken up first, even as from the beginning what is in question and
affords this works’ orientation are versions of what is true or believed to be.

After all, no Archimedean lever is available to get us properly in or out of
History. Neither Heidegger’s poignant and radically creative attempt, nor that of
traditional metaphysics and ontology can perform this trick. Contrariwise, the quietism in
some of the most advanced holistic thinking that bears the trace of positivism and its
oddly symmetrical converse in Gadamer’s historicity-inspired hermeneutics—an anti-
Archimedean Archimedeanism that claims we simply dwell undisturbed within tradition
and history as such—also do not supply an acceptable alternative. It is not possible to
proceed epochally and reset our relation to history as a whole, nor to ignore its
outstanding variety—neither by keeping silent or by affirming a single tradition in its
possible fullness. Instead, operating within one or another temporal stream and problem
horizon (as in this instance has been provided by Latour’s science studies and the three
“posts,” or such as are to be found within science, knowledge, religion, history, politics,
etc.), thought, reflection must, as it always has, each time begin anew and where it finds
itself, in the midst of what has been said (and those things, objects, states of affairs,
wishes, hopes and truth, of which this saying has spoken), and alongside what has not yet
been conceived: what remains to be found, created, discovered—thus in each case
proceeding within its own historicity.
The standard account of the life of Archimedes is found in Plutarch, *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*.

2 See also Latour’s own treatment of the Archimedean point in this volume, pp. 109 ff, itself a precis of his more sustained treatment in “The Force and Reason of Experiment.”

3 In such series, I thus include causal accounts of events (the election of the last president, the holocaust); as such these necessarily form independent lines or sequences, while also of course being able to draw on sets of simultaneous circumstances without invoking any period as such.

4 See my “Against the Period” for the argument in support of this claim.

5 Of the three, this is perhaps least true of the post-colonial initiative, which both does and does not understand our time in terms of such periodization—for example, in the work, respectively, of Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. It is doubtless evident in all versions of the postmodern, with the fleeting exceptions of some of Jean-François Lyotard’s later treatments, though his own *The Postmodern Condition* first set this movement on the path of an Archimedean event.

6 For the argument linking holism to historicity, as well as a somewhat fuller treatment of the former, taking Heidegger as my example, see my forthcoming article “Historicity and Holism: The Example of Deleuze.”

7 What has here been presented sequentially—a first oscillation between the social and truth, next an appeal to metaphysics or ontology—thus more often appears simultaneously in Latour’s work, or at least within a single volume, as in the “Irreductions” portion of *Pasteurization*. By laying these moments out sequentially instead, I enable a clearer comprehension of the difficulties each initiative encounters.

8 According to Heidegger, such considerations all still belong to the thing “as standing forth,” as produced from elsewhere and unconcealed in presence, a viewpoint that he explicitly aims to overcome (168).

9 A version of this problem already appears in Latour’s invocation of Tolstoy’s model of history in *Pasteurization*. Tolstoy, after all, takes the operation of his mass history to function on the model of the integral calculus (a feature of *War and Peace* that Latour fails to mention). Thus, the calculus is supposed to somehow supply a metastructuration of singular events, just as are Latour’s networks the objects and discoveries they inform.

10 Just to be clear, Latour is of course far less self-important and far more playful than Heidegger (another of his works’ attractive qualities). For him, metaphysics and ontology of various stripes (irreductions, Whitehead, etc.) is a means to an end, not a vocation in itself.

11 Gadamer sets forth this notion in part II, chapter 1, section b) iv of *Truth and Method*.

12 Hacking discusses the discovery of dolomite and its implication for science studies in chapter seven of his *The Social Construction of What?*, entitled “Rocks.”
WORKS CITED

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