THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

Alternate Realities
The philosopher Markus Gabriel is something of a wunderkind. Six years ago, at the tender age of 29, he was appointed to his current position as a professor of philosophy and chair of epistemology at the University of Bonn, making him the youngest holder of a philosophy chair in Germany. He is also at the forefront of an innovative, transnational philosophical current known as
the new realism (loosely affiliated with speculative realism, whose foremost representative is the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux). With the English translation of his provocatively titled recent book, Why the World Does Not Exist, it won’t be long before his nimble mind makes a distinct imprint on North American philosophical circles.

**REVIEW**

**Why the World Does Not Exist** by Markus Gabriel.

Translated by Gregory Ross (Polity Press)

As Gabriel tells it, the new realism emerged as an attempt to free philosophy from the dead end in which it had become entrapped by two earlier fashionable trends, postmodernism and social constructivism. They shared a thoroughgoing skepticism concerning the capacity of the human mind to penetrate the nature of objective reality, and held that all we can really know is our representations of reality. The upshot of these ultimately self-abnegating paradigms was that professional philosophy had de facto given up on reality.

In *Why the World Does Not Exist*, Gabriel provides us with a thought experiment to demonstrate the ludicrousness of the cul-de-sac in which much of academic philosophy finds itself today: "It would be odd if someone, in response to the question ‘Is there still some butter in the fridge?’, answered you by saying: ‘Yes, but the butter and the fridge are actually only an illusion, a human construction. In truth neither the butter nor the fridge exists. At the very least, we don’t know whether they exist. Nevertheless, enjoy your meal!’ " It’s a helpful reminder of the cavernous gap separating sophisticated professionals from healthy common sense.

The new realism distinguishes itself from the "old realism" (basically, Aristotle and his followers) by wisely steering clear of traditional metaphysical claims to know the ultimate nature of reality. In this way, it betrays a humility that shows that it has taken to heart the critique of metaphysics as purveyed by the Kantian tradition.

The riddle contained in Gabriel’s clever if somewhat melodramatic title pertains to the deceptions of linguistic convention. It was metaphysics — also known as "first philosophy" — that claimed to know the true nature of reality, or "the world." Only on this lexical basis can Gabriel assure us that, in this traditional philosophical sense, the world as a graspable and delimited totality "does not exist." As he adds by way of clarification: "If we think about the world, what we grasp is something different than what we want to grasp. We can never grasp the whole. It is in principle too big for any thought. … The world cannot in principle exist, because it is not found in the world."
To conclude that the world "is not found in the world" is not idle wordplay. It highlights the logical impossibility of locating "the world" in space and time. Any attempt to do so runs up against an insoluble conundrum: If the world, as is commonly held, contains everything that exists, what is it that, in turn, contains the world?

Among those who hazard exaggerated and misleading claims about what it would mean to know the world, the leading offenders, in Gabriel’s view, are the proponents of evolutionism and cognitive science. Both camps long for a unified field theory that would permanently allay both cognitive skepticism and the comparatively meager claims of individual academic disciplines. Such approaches are inherently flawed, because their scientism — the conviction that science alone represents the royal road to truth — leaves no room for phenomena like poetry, reverie, or human intimacy, experiences that prove refractory to laws of causal determination.

More seriously, the epistemological dogmatism of such approaches risks codifying a new species of metaphysical intolerance, since they condescendingly stigmatize competing claims as "unscientific." As Gabriel pointedly remarked in a 2014 article in Die Zeit: "At an earlier point, God and fate were invoked in order to deprive us of our freedom; today, it is ‘nature,’ ‘the universe,’ ‘the brain,’ ‘the egoistic gene’ or ‘evolution.’" In their aversion to positivism, Gabriel and his fellow new realists, such as the Italian philosopher Maurizio Ferraris, sport their cognitive pluralism on their sleeves.

The nonexistence of the world, one might say, is the bad news. By way of compensation — as well as consolation — Gabriel is quick to share with us the following bit of good news: "I also claim that considerably more exists than one would have expected — namely everything else except the world." Among his list of imaginary objects that may be said to exist — if the meaning of existence is extended to apply to what can be thought, or the notion of "possible worlds" — Gabriel includes elves, witches, "weapons of mass destruction in Luxembourg," and "unicorns on the far side of the moon that are wearing police uniforms." Upon reflection, there is little facile or gratuitous about such observations. We commonly think about culture and religious beliefs as a set of disembodied constructs that often have a distinctly powerful real-world impact.
At a recent book launch held by the Goethe-Institut in New York, I asked Gabriel how much of "reality" might we regain if we subscribe to the new realist paradigm. His response: in truth, not very much. The best that philosophy can do, as Kant proposed, is to certify the conditions or parameters under which valid knowledge of the world may be had. To attempt anything more is to risk relapsing into the hollow platitudes of old-style metaphysics. Still, the notion of reality or existence that the new realism proposes remains tepid. For Gabriel, to exist means to appear in what he, in reference to Wittgenstein’s later notion of language games, calls a "field of sense": a finite domain of meaningful connections. Fields of sense — in German, *Seinfelde*, a play on words that affords Gabriel, a connoisseur of American popular culture, an opportunity to allude to his favorite sitcom — stand in contrast to metaphysical attempts to understand the world as a finite, graspable totality.

Fields of sense are purportedly infinite — and infinity is a value that, in Gabriel’s view, is redolent of freedom. To engage "the diversity of interpretive possibilities beyond the fixed idea that there is a single world in which everything happens and which determines what is real and what is fiction" elicits what Gabriel approvingly terms "an emancipatory smile."

Such prescriptions seem reminiscent of Richard Rorty’s smug and nebulous idea of postmodern bourgeois liberalism — a paradigm whose viability hinges on our capacity for ceaseless and unending redescription of the world. Rorty declaims that "the aim of a just and free society [is] letting its citizens be as privatistic, ‘irrationalist,’ and aesthetic as they please so long as they do it on their own time — causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged." Or, as Nietzsche said, "There are no facts, only interpretations." The new-realist translation of Nietzsche’s claim might be, "There are no facts, only fields of sense." In the end, one is left wondering just how robust new realism’s reality quotient actually is.