

AMEEN METTAWA (Madrid)

Non-Philosophy and the uninterpretable axiom

Abstract

This article connects François Laruelle's non-philosophical experiments with the axiomatic method to non-philosophy's anti-hermeneutic stance. Focusing on two texts from 1987 composed using the axiomatic method, "The Truth According to Hermes" and "Theorems on the Good News," I demonstrate how non-philosophy utilizes structural mechanisms to both expand and contract the field of potential models allowed by non-philosophy. This demonstration involves developing a notion of interpretation, which synthesizes Rocco Gangle's work on model theory with respect to non-philosophy with Laruelle's critique of hermeneutics. I use Alexander Galloway's interpretation of "The Truth According to Hermes" as a case study of the limits non-philosophy sets upon its use as a basis for philosophical models, in contrast to arguments by Gangle regarding non-philosophy's greater genericity in comparison to philosophy.

Keywords: Model theory, hermeneutics, axiomatic method, the secret, generic

1. The "Meaning" of Non-Philosophy

In his review of François Laruelle's 1986 text *Philosophies of Difference*, Graham Harman criticizes what he perceives as Laruelle's obtuse style. In keeping with the tradition of such critiques, Harman offers a decontextualized quote from the book, followed by some commentary:

The sentence is certainly not 'meaningless.' Taken in context, its meaning is clear enough - eventually, after some minutes of labor. But to compile the chapter summaries above was never a pleasurable experience for this reviewer, and was often a downright painful one. Laruelle will get away with it only if he can prove that the payoff is sufficient to warrant the effort. (Harman 2011)

Rather than diagnosing Harman's pain as rooted in his philosophical modeling of Laruelle (i.e. the chapter summaries), Anthony Paul Smith responded with a defense of Laruelle's "style" itself:

[Laruelle's] style is actually quite playful in the French, not at all sober and academic as Harman suggests, and this playfulness comes through even as he lays a lot of stress on the importance of non-standard syntax for thinking non-philosophically. He also plays with and mimics the style of others [...] I think Rocco [Gangle, translator of *Philosophies of Difference*] captured this excellently in his translation and so reading him is no more difficult than reading Derrida, Henry, or Deleuze (and they are all difficult to read)" (Smith 2011).

One year after the original publication of *Philosophies of Difference*, in the article "The Truth According to Hermes," Laruelle addressed the very issue this exchange centers around, namely the relationship between non-philosophy and hermeneutics. In that essay, Laruelle criticizes both the decipherment of meaning and the communication of truth. However, the statements of both Harman and Smith demonstrate their adherence to a standard hermeneutics, which takes exactly these practices as its own. Harman, in what he seems to believe amounts to paying the devil his due by acknowledging that Laruelle's writing "is certainly not 'meaningless'," effectively misrepresents non-philosophy as participating in "hermetology," which "postulates that truth needs meaning" (Laruelle 2010, 19). Smith, by suggesting the hermeneutic heuristic of deriving meaning from Laruelle's texts by triangulating them in conjunction with his interlocutors, relinquishes Laruelle's project to the philosophized mode of interpretation which characterizes Harman's reading, offering readers an interpretive lens which non-philosophy intends to shatter.

In a later text, Laruelle writes that "non-philosophy is rationally incomprehensible within its presupposed but can be rendered philosophically intelligible through its modeling" (Laruelle 2012, 168). The latter claim, regarding the possibility of creating philosophical models of non-philosophical thought, is demonstrated in this case by Harman's attempt at a philosophical summary of *Philosophies of Difference* (and we will discuss modeling more below). The task of this paper is to demonstrate the former claim, that "non-philosophy is rationally incomprehensible within its presupposed." I will demonstrate this within a limited scope through a structural analysis of "The Truth According to Hermes." This analysis will allow us to contrast "Hermes" itself with Alexander Galloway's attempt at a philosophical model of the content of "Hermes" in *Laruelle: Against the Digital*, and will illustrate the tension between non-philosophy's rational incomprehensibility and the possibility of constructing philosophical models of non-philosophy. Although I designate

my approach as "structural," I hope to demonstrate the identity of structure and content in "Hermes." Although I will not argue that all non-philosophical texts are "rationally incomprehensible," at least not in the same manner as "Hermes," the argument I put forward does suggest generalization from "Hermes" on the basis of the centrality of the axiomatic method to non-philosophy.

2. The Axiomatic Method

In 1995's *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, Laruelle elaborated a description of non-philosophy, and specifically of its syntax (more on this below) through the axiomatic method. Prior to Philosophy III (the period of *Principles*), Laruelle had introduced non-philosophical axioms but had not yet formally used them in his major works as the basis for performing non-philosophy through the axiomatic method itself. However, two short texts from the Philosophy II period, "The Truth According to Hermes" and "Theorems on the Good News," make experimental use of the axiomatic method in a manner subtly, but illuminatingly, different from the relatively standard form in which the method appears in *Principles*.

Regarding the standard form, anyone familiar with Spinoza's *Ethics* will recognize philosophical appropriations of the axiomatic method, or what is sometimes called the "geometric" method (due to its use in Euclid's geometry). First principles are stated outright and are themselves categorized and differentiated. For instance, Euclid employs the categories "definitions," "postulates," and "common notions," with postulates and common notions both serving as what we would today call axioms. Spinoza's first principles are "definitions" and "axioms." Both Euclid and Spinoza make use of their demarcated first principles to derive "propositions" by way of proofs, which, when successful, rely entirely on the first principles, or on other propositions already proven on the basis of the first principles. Later implementations of the axiomatic method, including in Laruelle's work, name propositions as "theorems." An axiomatic system's method of proving theorems is structured according to inference rules:

Such rules are supposed to be truth-preserving in the following sense: as far as the axioms are true the theorems derived from these axioms are also true. Further, these rules are supposed to be not specific for any given theory: one assumes that the same set of rules of inference applies in all axiomatic theories (logical monism) or at least that any complete set of such rules applies in some large class of theories (logical pluralism). (Rodin 2011, 1)

Inference rules function, like axioms, as fundamental features of the logical architecture through which theorems are proven. Like axioms, they are not themselves proven. Inference rules are often only implied, yet they are discernible in the truth-preserving transformations undergone by axiomatic elements over the course of a proof.

In the section of *Principles of Non-Philosophy* titled "Transcendental theorems on the idiom of the One," Laruelle explicitly lists his definitions, axioms, and rules of inference (or what he calls "operations"), and then the theorems derived from these first principles. Prior to this, Laruelle experimented with an axiomatic method which did not explicitly state any axioms. Take the following example, from "Theorems on the Good News," first published in 1987, the same year as "The Truth According to Hermes":

"Theorem 0 or the Transcendental Theorem,
On Nontransferable Identity,
Nothing can, except through illusion, substitute itself for man and for his identity.
And man cannot, except through illusion, substitute himself for philosophy, for the
Other, etc. Man is an inalienable reality. There is no reversibility between man and
philosophy.

Theorem 00,
On the Proof, as Transcendental or By Way of 0
The previous theorem is demonstrated (for) itself, that is, non-thetically. The present
theorem and those that follow derive from the previous" (Laruelle 2014, 41).

Theorem 0 is simply a specific case of the law of identity ($A=A$), which would conventionally be treated as an axiom. The law of identity, which here becomes $\text{man}=\text{man}$, is taken as given by almost all philosophers (this should be our first clue as to why Laruelle would not call Theorem 0 an axiom). Laruelle makes the absent-presence of axioms even more explicit by having Theorem 00 say that Theorem 0 "is demonstrated (for) itself." This phrase, "demonstrated (for) itself," indicates a certain kind of self-evidence. However, self-demonstration is not equivalent to the direct self-evidence, without need for demonstration, of axioms such as Descartes' "clear and distinct perceptions." Nevertheless, Theorem 0 functions "axiomatically," insofar as it is that from which all the other theorems are derived. Why call Theorem 0 a theorem then, since it functions like an axiom and does not rely on derivation from some other axiom? Even more strangely, Theorem 00, which attributes self-demonstrating power to Theorem 0, is itself said to derive from Theorem 0. Self-demonstration here, rather than being definitional of Theorem 0, which would bring Theorem 0 closer to a self-evident axiom, is instead derived from Theorem 0, *from* itself, and thus

demonstrated according to a derivation (accomplished by Theorem 00), rather than in Theorem 0 by itself. Theorem 00 retroactively performs an axiomatization-effect upon Theorem 0, which floats without ground, following Theorem 00's derivation from Theorem 0.

3. The Non-Euclidean Analogy

The exercise in which Laruelle is engaged in "Theorems on the Good News" effectively constitutes an attempt at producing axiomatic thinking without deciding upon any axiom in particular as the ground for that thinking. Although, as we know from *Principles*, later iterations of the axiomatic method will be explicitly grounded in non-philosophical axioms, this earlier text suggests an experiment in genericity, which bears on the famous analogy between non-philosophy and non-Euclidean geometry. Non-philosophy is said to be like non-Euclidean geometry because non-philosophy suspends certain intransigent philosophical axioms in the same manner and to similar effect as non-Euclidean geometry's suspension of the parallel postulate. Gangle provides the following elaboration:

The analogy translates to the case of non-philosophy and philosophy as follows: if philosophy is conceived as the analogue of Euclidean geometry, it is clear that an analogous 'subtraction' of one or more of philosophy's 'axioms' (roughly, its enabling presuppositions) will in no way negate or disqualify philosophy as such. Instead, it will open up a wider range of possible models for the 'reduced' or 'simplified' system. All the philosophical models will be included in this larger class, but so will additional models that the now subtracted axiom(s) would have excluded. In this sense, non-philosophy is understood to extend philosophy, that is, it opens a more general domain of which philosophy represents only one restricted sub-domain. By calling the mode of thinking that proceeds in-One or according-to-One non-philosophy, Laruelle intends simply to designate that a less restricted form of thinking than that of philosophy (one involving fewer presuppositions) is thereby more general. In this way, non-philosophy engages a 'space' of thinking that includes (the models of) philosophy while also including other models that philosophy axiomatically excludes. (Gangle 2013, 53)

According to Gangle, non-philosophy is, in part, an attempt at thinking in a manner which is more generic than philosophy, insofar as it is more model-inclusive. Part of non-philosophy's effort at increasing philosophy's genericity is the suspension of philosophical axioms which are taken as constraints on thinking (or on what counts as thinking), so that more thought may be included within, or modeled on the basis of, a new and

less limiting non-philosophy. Gangle's characterization of the non-Euclidean analogy lets us see the experiment of "Good News" as the construction of a radically generic axiomatic method which proceeds without the constraints of axioms at all, while simultaneously maintaining the axiomatic method's rigorous formal structure through the use of axiomatization-effects.

4. Models

Before proceeding to an account of how "The Truth According to Hermes" fits into (and contests) this characterization of the non-philosophical appropriation of the axiomatic method as a genercization of philosophy, I will first offer some comments on what Gangle means by "model." As Gangle explains with regard to the axiomatic method, "while perfectly rigorous theorems may be generated deductively from an axiomatic system, precisely *what* those theorems refer to remains underdetermined. Indeed the *what* to which the axioms apply is determined only up to and precisely no farther than the system of deductive consequences generated by the axioms themselves" (Gangle 2013, 51). A theorem formulated through the axiomatic method, as an abstract system for the production of such theorems given a set of grounding constraints, is not inherently indexed to a referent outside of the system within which the theorem is derived. In order to determine that to which axioms and theorems may coherently refer, one uses model theory, which Gangle describes as establishing "the conditions under which systems of objects and relations may be said to 'satisfy' a determined set of axioms" (Gangle 2013, 50). A formal definition of these conditions may go as follows (note that theorems are a subset of well-formed formulas):

A well-formed formula **B** is said to be true for the interpretation **M** iff every sequence in Σ (the set of all denumerable sequences of elements of the domain of **M**), satisfies **B**. **B** is said to be false for **M** iff no sequence in Σ satisfies **B**. Then an interpretation **M** is said to be a model for a set Γ of well-formed formulas iff every well-formed formula in Γ is true for **M**

In other words, an interpretation of some axiomatic system is an attempt at mapping the "combinatorics" of that system onto things external to the system in such a way that the syntax of the system is preserved. Gangle defines "syntax" as "the purely formal operations that regulate and transform strings of symbols or formulas" (Gangle 2013, 44). When a mapping, or interpretation, of an axiomatic system onto something else is successful (i.e. when the mapping preserves the system's syntax), this constitutes a model.

Returning to Gangle's comments regarding the greater genericity of non-philosophy compared to philosophy, we can now understand this greater genericity as something, which would be demonstrated by the applicability of the non-philosophical axiomatic system to a larger set of thinking processes than those to which one may apply an axiomatically formulated version of conventional philosophy. Accordingly, non-philosophy would have the capacity to provide the syntactical coordinates upon which one could mount a coherent interpretation of thinking processes excluded by philosophy, in addition to philosophical thinking processes. If this proved true, we could then characterize non-philosophy as being more open to modeling than philosophy, and thus more generic.

5. The Truth According to Hermes

Laruelle's other 1987 experiment with the axiomatic method, "The Truth According to Hermes," is either an exception or a challenge to this characterization of non-philosophy, for reasons given in the argument below. These same reasons compel me not to offer my own interpretation of this text, but instead a summary of the interpretation Alexander Galloway makes in *Laruelle: Against the Digital*.

According to Galloway, Laruelle claims that the "media principle" is a governing structure of metaphysics, hermeneutics, and communication (Galloway 2014, xxi). It amounts to the assumption of a connection between truth and "a human agent" which communicates truth (Galloway 2014, xx). Laruelle dismisses the idea that truth can be communicated by a human agent as an idea based in an epistemologically limiting, "narcissistic" anthropocentrism (Galloway 2014, xxi). The secret, which Galloway takes as another name for Truth, the One, and the Real, is never revealed to anyone, but "the fact of it being communicated" is (Galloway 2014, xxii). Because Laruelle doesn't want knowledge of the secret to be tainted by human bias, he rejects hermeneutics and phenomenology as methods of accessing truth, since they function according to the media principle (Galloway 2014, xxii). Galloway then lists other philosophers and philosophical traditions Laruelle explicitly or implicitly rejects, but qualifies this as not exactly a rejection but more of a reduction to a state of materiality at which point non-philosophy engages them (Galloway 2014, xxiii). Galloway describes the practice of such an engagement precisely: "Non-philosophy means, essentially, to select an existing philosophical system, hermeneutics say, and to analyze it exclusively for the generic logics that exist within it. These logics are what remain once the human, the person who decides to do philosophy, is removed" (Galloway 2014, xxiii). Despite being unable to communicate truth, or the secret, all philosophies contain these "generic logics" which are conditioned

by truth, and thus all philosophies have some connection to truth (Galloway 2014, xxiii). Non-philosophy would then be the practice of elucidating this connection through an analysis of generic logics.

Galloway's reading is marked by a systematic misidentification of Laruelle's theorems as "theses." Theorems imply derivation from axioms, while theses lack this implication. Furthermore, Laruelle will later distinguish between demonstration through the axiomatic method and argument through "philosophical theses" on the basis that the latter cannot provide acceptable accounts of "the real or phenomenal experience" (Laruelle 2013, 5). However, Galloway's reading is a philosophical interpretation of "Hermes," and should be judged according to the conditions for successful modeling, as discussed above. We will examine Galloway's interpretation to determine if it is a model, in which case it would interpret Laruelle's text in a manner, which preserves its syntax.

We encounter our first problem when we consider that "Hermes" rejects interpretation as such. As Galloway says himself, "Alienation, translation, interpretation, reflection—these many vectors of the human mind are all steadfastly resisted by Laruelle" (Galloway 2014, xxi). And yet Galloway is undoubtedly producing an interpretation of Laruelle's text and, moreover, he does so on the basis of introducing a grounding rejection of "correlationism" (Galloway 2014, xx). All of Galloway's remarks regarding the limits of human cognition have been inserted by him in his attempt to model "Hermes" as a philosophical attack on correlationism. Galloway is able to turn the text into a critique of the limits of human understanding because he has assumed the text's axiom to be something like: "there is no correlation between Truth and its communication." However, the closest we get to such a formulation is in Laruelle's first theorem, where he says "hermeto-logical Difference is the indissoluble correlation, the undecidable coupling of truth *and* its communication" (Laruelle 2010, 19). This theorem, however, must be understood as itself derived from an implicit axiom or axioms, and not considered the ground of the text itself. Although it is acceptable to axiomatize theorems which have been properly derived from a system's axioms according to the inference rules governing that system, it is at the very least careless to treat one theorem as that from which all other theorems are derived when one knows neither the system's axioms or inference rules, considering that any given theorem may be insufficient for the derivation of some other(s).

Galloway's erasure of the axiomatic structure of the text allows him to covertly axiomatize the rejection of correlation. Galloway effectively reads "The Truth According to Hermes" as though it was a non-hermeneutics in the following manner: a hermeneutics which suspends the axiom of correlation. This would allow for a comparison between

"Hermes" and the general non-philosophical project of doing philosophy without certain philosophical axioms, as discussed above through Gangle. The problem is that, elsewhere, when Laruelle is engaging in that general project, his axioms are clearly stated (such as in *Principles*). Laruelle does in fact suspend the hermeneutic axiom of correlation, but this is not what provides the systemic architecture for the derivation of his theorems. The suspension of this axiom is accomplished within the theorems, which have themselves been derived from another axiom.

Let us attempt to find another model for this text, to better understand its structure. Theorems 1 through 7 closely parallel parts of Heidegger's lecture "What Is Metaphysics?" wherein he substantializes Nothing as the origin of negation. In that lecture, Heidegger argues that (1) science rejects the Nothing as an object of thought, while (2) nevertheless employing negation. Through a phenomenological analysis of moods, however, we can discover that (3) negation comes from a more primordial experience of the Nothing. This appears to map the syntax of Laruelle's text when summarized as follows: (1) generalized hermeneutics rejects the possibility of an uninterpretable truth, while (2) nevertheless relying on concealment (secrets, understood as something occulted but theoretically knowable; and all things for generalized hermeneutics become secrets to be deciphered); (3) the process of decipherment of what is concealed is a process which "emerges" from the more primordial uninterpretable secret (Theorem 4: "[the secret] is itself the uninterpretable from which an interpretation emerges"). This Heideggerian interpretation takes Laruelle's disconnected theorems and hallucinates an argument through them on the basis of Heideggerian presuppositions. If we come to Laruelle's text with Heideggerian assumptions, or if we insert these assumptions as axioms and prove the theorems on that basis, Laruelle seems to provide a system which allows for a model in the form of the Nothing argument. We can thus map Laruelle's terms (generalized hermeneutics, the Uninterpretable, interpretation) onto Heideggerian terms (science, the Nothing, negation). Further, given that Laruelle provides no proofs for his theorems, we would import Heidegger's own rules of inference.

However, to get this far would be to ignore every broad antagonism toward Heideggerian philosophy found in the text: "[the secret] is an immediate transcendental given, an immediate that is absolutely pre-dialectical and pre-differential, pre-Hegelian or pre-Heideggerian" (Theorem 6); "[the secret] is the One, understood in an absolutely immanent and finite way; it excludes the play of Being" (Theorem 9); "The unitary philosopher (the philosopher of Being, then of difference) was always a representative, emissary, and civil servant of the Postal and Telecommunication Ministry" (Theorem 16). If Heidegger's argument on the Nothing is conditioned by an investigation of Being (which,

of course, it is), then the content of Laruelle's theorems has sufficiently ruled out the possibility of a Heideggerian model of the text.

This exercise can be repeated for each of the philosophers and philosophical pre-suppositions Laruelle explicitly or implicitly rejects throughout the text. Galloway is correct in stating that, with "Hermes," "Laruelle has essentially barred himself from entry into the intellectual currents of the twentieth century" (Galloway 2014, xxiii) by way of its resolutely negative theorems. In addition to Heidegger and all of hermeneutics, Laruelle explicitly rejects Hegel, Nietzsche, "conflict of interpretations" theory (Ricoeur), philosophies of "the structure of Difference in general" (Deleuze), and "play in general" (Derrida). Laruelle has constricted, in the broadest possible strokes with regard to the philosophies of his predecessors and contemporaries, the possibility of modeling the text philosophically.

A major difference between "The Truth According to Hermes" and "Theorems on the Good News," with regard to their implementations of the axiomatic method, is that while "Good News" experiments with thinking axiomatically without axioms toward radical genericity, "Hermes" structurally operates against genericity by occluding the possibility of philosophical models. Although, like "Good News," "Hermes" lacks an explicitly stated axiomatic ground (remembering that axiom-suspension, for Gangle, corresponds to greater genericity), two factors collude against interpretations which aspire to model the text: (1) the broad rejection of the nearest philosophical ideas, and (2) the incommunicability of the secret. By "concealing" the axiomatic basis of the text, Laruelle has effectively positioned this basis *as* the secret. The secret, as a concealment without content which interpretations lack access to but nevertheless continuously posit in corrupted form, is immanently axiomatized within the text. We cannot attribute meaning (understood as an interpretation, which qualifies as a model) to the text given that the theorems of the text are derived from an uninterpretable truth, and thus can only exist within their own inapplicable axiomatic system.

*Ameen Mettawa, La Escuelita, Centro de Arte 2 de Mayo,
ameen.mettawa[at]gmail.com*

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