

# DE-BRIEFING AIME PROJECT

## a participant perspective

by Terence Blake

**Abstract:** This paper attempts to evaluate the AIME project immanently, from the perspective of a participant, in terms of five criteria: digitality, diplomacy, religiosity, testability, and democracy. A sixth criterion runs through the other five: pluralism. I distinguish between AIME as project, as process, and as party line.

### INTRODUCTION

I have been actively engaged for many years with diverse projects aimed at elaborating a pluralist epistemology and metaphysics adapted to the modern world. I have also been involved in the with digital experiments in philosophical pedagogy and research. In particular, I took part in the Second Life discussion group and the blog preceding and accompanying Hubert Dreyfus's ALL THINGS SHINING project, and in Bernard Stiegler's digital seminar. I founded a blog devoted to pluralist philosophy, called **Agent Swarm** (the subtitle of the blog is "Pluralism and Individuation in a World of Becoming"). I already knew and admired the work on science studies published by Bruno Latour, John Law, and Andrew Pickering. So I was very excited when I learned that Bruno Latour was going to publish a text on pluralist ontology accompanied by an innovative digital platform, and I did all that was within my power to participate in the initiative. I discuss AIME from the point of view of a participant, of someone who is neither an external observer nor an adherent, but an active co-articulator.

The AIME project is a game-changing speculative endeavour, providing one possible instantiation of the more general project of a pluralist epistemology and ontology. It proposes a radically new understanding of Being in terms of Being-as-other.

The AIME process is revolutionary in conception, as it involves not only an ontology based on a new ontological hypothesis (being-as-other), but also a new way of doing ontology (empirical metaphysics), and a new means of organising, promoting and teaching ontological research (the AIME digital platform).

The AIME party line is rich, complex, and self-correcting, but it re-introduces an authoritarian tendency, a centralisation, rigidity, and closure, that are not in harmony with the pluralist project, nor required by the digitally supported process.

### DIGITALITY

A first criterion constitutes a threshold for entry into the AIME process: digitality. Latour proposes AIME as an exemplary contribution to the digital humanities. The old methods of research and exposition are quickly becoming antiquated in the light of the new digital technologies. The democratic demands of bringing education to a greater number and of making it more relevant are slowly making themselves felt. Bruno Latour talks a lot about "digital humanities" yet he consistently undervalues blogs. In this he repeats habits belonging to the academy that he is trying to escape or transform. Despite his wariness of the "terrible things that happen on blogs", his own AIME site is basically a heavily moderated blog, with the text of his book displayed in a searchable side bar. Latour's site is no heuristic model for fundamental research in ontology, nor pedagogical model for the teaching of the digital humanities. Given the stringent moderation process any potential "contribution" must go through in order to be published on the site, it is a much more

authoritarian structure than a university seminar.

My involvement with the AIME project has been totally digitally based. I was enthusiastic about the project from the beginning, and I became one of the early adopters, and one of the early contributors to his site, and an early reader of the book, which I bought when it first came out in French, and then again when it came out in English. I was an early commenter, both on my own blog and on a collective blog devoted to the book and project: <https://aimegroup.wordpress.com/>. I was an early reviewer of the book, publishing a large number of analyses and discussions on my blog, and I posted one of the first full-length [reviews](#). I have written a number of articles on AIME, all of which are assemblages of posts that were first published on my blog, AGENT SWARM, then gathered together, re-written and posted on my [academia.edu](http://academia.edu) page.

My participation in the debate around Latour's book has been principally positive, and only secondarily negative or critical. Aside from the engagement with the book and a couple of contributions to the site, I [defended Latour](#) from a series of ill-informed criticisms during the "Pluralism Wars", a controversy which flared up in January 2014 on various blogs associated with speculative realism, and which tried to present Latour's realist pluralism as a form of irrationalist anti-realist relativism. My own involvement with epistemological and ontological pluralism dates back to 1972 and my first encounter with Paul Feyerabend's works. I have long been not just a contributor but an independent co-articulator of pluralism, a fellow-traveller to AIME, making common cause with its project of elaborating an ontological pluralism. But where is the place in Latour's paradigm of the digital humanities for such independent, participative work?

Latour has limited himself to describing the features and the advantages of this digital experiment, but has given no concrete example of the discoveries it has led to as far as the philosophical content of the book is concerned, which confirms my suspicion that the platform itself tends to become the message. Latour explicitly declared that he wants neither critique nor commentary, and advised one questioner (a woman who contrasted the inhumanity of the project with Latour's own very engaging humanity in presenting it): "contribute, don't comment". I fear this prefigures a model of digital humanities as composed of an array of mutually exclusive closed societies, juxtaposed without interacting (as interaction would be mere "commentary"). It also violates Latour's principle of anti-fundamentalism, where fundamentalism is defined as the "refusal of controversies".

Latour's site is philosophical in content, it develops and articulates an ontology. Its *results* as a contribution to pluralist ontology are to be evaluated principally in terms of philosophical criteria. Its *success* as a contribution to the digital humanities is to be measured in terms of the heuristic impulse it gives to ontological research and of the pedagogical articulation of pluralist ontology it permits. Not in terms of its contribution to the edification of a new paradigmatic dogma and of a confidential micro-sociological consensus. The initial democratic momentum of opening up access to the book and to the discussions it provokes by means of the digital platform tends to be lost under the authoritarian formatting and closure imposed by the rules of contribution adopted for that platform. There is an unresolved tension, and the democracy tends to lose out to the digitality.

## **DIPLOMACY**

A second criterion, that of "diplomacy", is ostentatiously advanced in the framing of the project, where one might have expected to see "democracy". Bruno Latour talks about diplomacy a lot in relation to AIME, and he gives it several incompatible meanings. However, despite the omnipresence of this rhetoric, there is not the slightest real diplomacy in Latour's work, all talk of it is metaphor and theatre. Latour represents no one but himself and his project, and he speaks in the name of his own personal "modernity". He certainly does not speak in my name, or in the name of my modernity, or of that of many others. Latour's modernity, including his "religious mode

of existence", is a biographically and intellectually motivated minority perspective rather than the result of empirical research or democratic consultation.

Latour's AIME is no longer simply a project but a self-organising process, a digital performance converging towards an academic competence. The indicators of competence – technical jargon, one-dimensional timeline, academic diffusion, specialist applications – are increasing. AIME, which has already moved from project to process has been crystallising as party line. I have come out in favour of the project of a pluralist ontology, which I support. I am also a fellow-traveller of the AIME process, participating as I can. I am not, however, an adherent of the AIME party line. Who represents me and people like me in the diplomatic negotiation that is the framing metaphor for the AIME process? The question of **scale** has become important: what relation can there be between a potential contributor and the over-arching process? what diplomacy is possible between David and Goliath? On the scale of the AIME process the question arises: is diplomacy necessarily a synonym of assimilation, incorporation, or engulfment? Can one be a dialogic partner without being engulfed? This question of scale in relation to democracy is the same as that posed by MOOCS: a laudable democratic gesture of the expansion of access to education is in danger of imposing an authoritarian model of learning, evaluation, and entitlement. As we have already seen for the problems of formatting, so too with the extended scale, the digital (technology) comes to prime over the human (democracy).

I have contributed to the AIME site, but I find its protocol far too constraining. Further, there is no interactivity – neither between contributors and the AIME team nor among contributors. The whole enterprise is quite frustrating. I have blogged about it critically, in terms of a [deficit of democracy](#). But there is no interlocutor to whom to address such complaints. Latour usually dismisses such critiques as irrelevant, and highlights the value of his four year experiment in close reading. It functions more as a very interesting experiment in digitally assisted cognitive teamwork, and its most revolutionary, but also most problematic, aspect is the system of management necessitated by its scale. "Diplomacy" is the name for this transformation of democracy into management, of open exchange into closed moderation. On the positive side, this appeal to diplomacy is a constant reminder to struggle against any tendency to impose the hegemony of one particular mode.

## RELIGIOSITY

On the question of religion, it cannot be a criterion in the contemporary world. Both Badiou and Latour observe that religion as "truth procedure" (Badiou) or as "mode of veridiction" (Latour) is dead in the society at large. I have no objection on principle to Latour's personal Catholicism. If his religious affiliation gives him the perspective and the strength to contest scientism, economism, and other reductionisms, this is a very considerable heuristic advantage and should be valued as such. However, I do object to Latour's inscribing a form of Catholicism, however refined, into the purportedly empirical description of the Moderns, i.e. to his imposing Catholicism on us all, as part of our very definition. The idea that we are all ontologically Catholic is unacceptable and anachronistic. It violates Latour's own diplomatic principle of anti-hegemony. I find Latour's refined theology both too aristocratic and not poetic enough. It seems to be an arbitrary boundary condition imposed on the system from outside.

I have no hostility to religion as such, and I think that there is much to learn from the way Latour takes it out of the mode of REF and and of belief. However, I do not think that enshrining religion in a separate mode REL is the best way to do justice to religion historically, sociologically, and anthropologically. Also, I disapprove of smuggling assumptions into a text that is not supposed to be a theological treatise, but an empirical ontology. A philosophical text that is far more widely welcomed by priests and theologians than by philosophers raises many doubts and questions as to its impartiality and representativity.

Latour wishes to avoid “fundamentalism” in questions of religion and also of science and politics. He defines this fundamentalism as “the refusal of controversies” (i.e. of dialogues where there is no pre-given arbiter) and as “the attempted exercise of hegemony of one mode of existence over the others” (CRITIQUE, Nov. 2012, p 953). This hegemony is what many pluralists have fought under the name of reductionism. Reduction lies in treating religion as a matter of belief, and as submitted to the same truth-régime as referential domains like science. Latour is quite explicit that for him religion is not a question of belief at all, not a question of reference to the physical world, but one of a transformative message. One can find this symbolic, existential, non-referential view of religion in the movement of demythologisation and in post-Wittgensteinian philosophies of religion. Slavoj Žižek also propounds this as a possible use of religion. In the English-speaking world the "refined" approach to religion has frequently involved turning towards Eastern religions (a phenomenon that Žižek discusses under the name of "Western Buddhism"). It may be a minority position compared to the number of fundamentalists, but it is one contemporary possibility for the religious form of life.

I don't think that the reserves that have been expressed on the treatment of religion in AIME are due to dusty abstract philosophers being unable to cope with empirical investigation, but rather they are due to people finding that the inquiry is not empirical enough. For those who are Christians, the reduction of religion to REL has potentially devastating consequences. Not only does God not exist in a referential sense, but neither does Jesus (or if it could be shown that he did, it would be irrelevant). The Gospels on this view describe no empirical historical facts, as they are not at all referential texts but propose the symbolic wisdom or "poetry" of REL. With Jesus non-existent or irrelevant, we have REL as a Christ-without-Jesus mode, that very few Christians would recognise as the essence of their faith. So treating REL as mode is doing no service to Christianity, except for those who already embrace the refined, or symbolic, Christ-without-Jesus version.

Convincing arguments can be given in favour of classifying religion as a meta-mode providing a new image of truth and veridiction to rival that imposed by philosophy (this is Badiou's preferred solution), or as mode (Latour's preferred solution), or as sub-mode of MET (this is the solution I favour). One could argue for some ambivalence (meta-mode, mode, or sub-mode) in relation to other modes, such as MET, or even REP. I think this *ambiguity* of categorisation could be seen as a positive feature of Latour's ontology: its categories exist to expand and to free the range of experience taken into consideration, not to reduce and confine it.

## **TESTABILITY**

Packed amphitheatres and multiple workshops have no necessary connection with confirming such an ontology. Theoretically Latour is "Popperian", as he emphasises the necessity for "trials" or what Popper called "tests" (this verbal difference between Latour and Popper does not exist in French, where both words are translated by "épreuve"). However, Latour's practice in AIME is often "Kuhnian", since he also talks about the necessity and value of team work for research, of a shared vocabulary and enduring commitment, and of collective close reading. His model for AIME is normal science in Kuhn's sense, where he first provides the framing paradigm, and then calls for "contributions" i.e. for puzzle-solving activities that never question the fundamental assumptions of the paradigm.

Popper seeks to encourage bold speculative conjectures and equally bold attempts at refutation, Kuhn seeks to maintain the paradigm and to turn puzzles into confirmations. Critical discussion and the demand for testability are refutation-oriented. Amphitheatres, workshops, closed teams, collective close readings, and modest contributions are confirmation-oriented. AIME's digital platform allows only "contributions" i.e. confirming instances. There is no room for trials that end up disconfirming or profoundly modifying the paradigm's major theses. The Popperian democratic

call for trials and dissensus tends to succumb to the Kuhnian emphasis on confirmations and consensus.

This is bound up with the basic rule for a contribution: no commentary, no critique, no debate over the foundational hypotheses, just a brief discussion that confirms or extends the paradigm and that provides a confirming document or reference as proof. In this way, all strong critique is blocked or discouraged: minor revisions are welcomed, but major trials are excluded. The time frame of the digital platform (the long delay while a contribution is awaiting moderation) and the invisibility to others of a contribution before it is published preclude any authentic discussion, except between the AIME moderator and the candidate contributor. AIME is not a discussion platform but a director's cut. Disconfirming instances and critical analyses are simply not published., and there is no agora for more free form discussion.

The AIME site actively excludes fundamental discussion, and to that extent its pedagogical model is anachronistic and faulty. Pedagogy is not confined just to magisterial exposition, but also involves trial-and-error, inviting and dealing with objections, which is a far messier but more democratic business than the aseptic process of approving or disapproving "contributions". The site's function here is ambivalent: it both democratically invites participation and authoritarily constrains it.

## **DEMOCRACY**

My problem with AIME is not its supposed "relativism". I have argued that it is in fact what it claims to be: a pluralist and realist project. That is why I have been enthusiastic about it, and why I defended it during the Pluralism Wars. Rather, my problem is that even though it is pluralist, it is still not pluralist enough. Unfortunately its pluralism is incomplete, and this flaw is tied to its perpetuation of a closed and non-democratic academic habitus.

Latour likes to give the impression that all the critics of his project are monists and reductionists. This is not my case. My objections are pluralistic. I am a fellow traveler with AIME in defence of pluralism and in the struggle against scientism and other reductionisms. The big problem here is that Latour's modes are élitist, whereas the domains he derives them from are, at least potentially, democratic. For example, REL as defined in AIME is élitist, while religion is democratic, i.e. "gnostic" in Latour's terminology.

The only trial that Latour allows for his descriptions of modes is the intuition of the relevant experts. The only protest of experience that he allows is the protest of the experts. Protest by competent authorities must be converted into acceptance, so Latour's conceptual radicalism is finalised by his aim of obtaining expert consensus and specialist consent. The modal authorities are defined as the only legitimate protestors.

In the case of religion, priests and pastors are defined as the relevant experts on REL, those who need to be convinced. Ordinary people who practice a religion must accept their judgement, or be regarded as "gnostics". Only the religious experts can protest, the testimony of the gnostics (i.e. virtually everybody else) is rejected as resulting from the "wrong" apocalypse. Latour applies the same élitist grid that he uses for science (experts vs laypeople, modes vs domains) to religion.

This anti-democratic élitism is written into the very terms of the system, for instance in the difference posited between mode and domain. Latour extracts an essence out of a domain in which people of many different types participate, and elevates this essence to the status of a "mode" of existence presided over by experts. Latour's thought here is extremely bifurcationist: modes are bifurcated from domains, experts from citizens. Yet AIME is constantly shuttling back and forth between modes and domains. It could not arouse and maintain any interest without this constant

exchange and interference, that it is obliged to label as confusion when found in rival perspectives.

The distinction between a mode and its domain can only be local, temporary, and controversial. It cannot be decreed once and for all. In everyday life, domains interfere constantly in the modes and transform them, this is both legitimate and necessary, not only for progress but for the very content of the discourses and the practices in play. A mode is a political selection of one particular current amongst many others within a domain, it is not a static universal essence.

Latour's system is not as empirical as he would have us believe. "Experience" should mean everyone's experience, not just that of experts as related to their special subjects and interests. The very naming of the modes is oriented towards differing a priori requirements. Why, for example, is the scientific mode called REF and the psychological mode MET, but the religious mode REL? Calling the scientific mode REF is a democratic move, subsuming specialist science under the more general category of referential knowledge that is open to everybody. Similarly, in another democratic move, the psyche is taken from the exclusive hands of the experts (psychoanalysts, psychologists, and psychiatrists) and subsumed under a more general category - MET, the beings of metamorphosis, and of their psychogenic networks. This is AIME at its strongest, combining conceptual invention and democratic inclusion.

So why is the mode corresponding to religion called REL? Why isn't religion treated like these other domains, and subsumed in a more general and more democratic category, such as "attention" or "care"? The religious mode is called REL because Latour has already decided on its role and content in advance. He is very attached to having religion as a mode, this is not at all an empirical finding but an ideological requirement. This ontological legitimation of religion goes together with the abandon of all empirical description of real religious practice and communities of faith, and the promotion of an élitist abstraction, the refined non-referential interpretation of religion. To enter the religious mode you must undergo a conversion, a semiotic apocalypse, or stay outside as a "gnostic" or a fundamentalist. Thus REL, as defined by AIME, is both non-empirical and anti-democratic.

More generally, this reduction of experience to expert opinion shows a residual élitism of AIME: it is not an anthropology of the experiences and perspectives of all practitioners equally, but only of the ideological consensus of certain privileged groups and representatives.

## CONCLUSION

Rather than treating Latour's system as a new paradigm, one might better conceive of AIME as a preliminary experiment aimed at arousing interest in the project of an anthropological description of the moderns. The description finally adopted should not consist in a pre-existent system presented in a monologue to the other-than-moderns, in view of subsequently initiating dialogue, but should itself emerge out of an open dialogue. Latour is contradictory in that he both outsources and wants to keep centralised control of the descriptive process. He thus imposes convergence on the "best" description, rather than allowing for dissensus, divergence and multiple descriptions.

The aim of my remarks is not to offer a critique of AIME insofar as it is a pluralist project, but to help Bruno Latour to detect and eliminate the non-pluralistic, non-empirical, and non-democratic aspects of his system, which are incompatible with its explicit goals. This text and this project are transformative. But are we talking about the transformation operated by the religious point of view, or that operated by the perspective of a pluralist ontology? Latour's speculative hypothesis is one of ontological pluralism: being-as-other is the principle of metamorphic abundance. All talk of "modes" and of "prepositions" are stuttering attempts to awaken us to this abundant world. The categories posited by AIME are provisional: transitory, local and contingent means of calling us to attend to, and to care for, the vastness of our experience and of the pluriverse.