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QUENTIN MEILLASSOUX

A NEW FRENCH PHILOSOPHER

Graham Harman

This article is a review of *Après la finitude*, the remarkable debut book of Quentin Meillassoux.¹ In my estimation, this work is one of the most important to appear in continental philosophy in recent years, and deserves a wide readership at the earliest possible date. An English translation by Ray Brassier will be published by Continuum in the near future.²

Meillassoux's book is written in a lucid and economical style, covering abundant terrain in just 165 pages. It offers bold readings of the history of philosophy—Aristotle is not realist enough, Hume not skeptical enough. It shows bursts of scathing wit, as when drawing wry parallels between the anti-Darwinian reveries of creationism and major schools of present-day philosophy. Most importantly, *Après la finitude* offers a ruthless attack on virtually all of post-Kantian philosophy, now labeled as “correlationism,” and proposes an original “speculative” solution (though not in Hegel's sense) to the Kantian impasse. Meillassoux proposes nothing less than a return of philosophy to the absolute, which for him means reality in itself apart from any relation to humans. The critical portions of the book strike me as definitive: much of what we know as analytic and continental philosophy looks rather different following his assault on correlationism. Meillassoux's own ideas, plausibly described as the mere antechamber to a larger and still unpublished system, lie open to possible objections. Nonetheless, his appeal to an “ancestral” realm prior to all human access succeeds in defining an unexpected new battlefield for continental thought. Barely forty years old, he seems likely to emerge as one of the important names in European philosophy in the decades to come.

We should begin by situating Meillassoux among the more established contemporary thinkers. For many years, continental philosophy in the Anglophone world was dominated

by Heidegger and Derrida. Neither of these figures will soon disappear from radar, and Heidegger is now celebrated as a classic for the ages even by mainstream analytic thinkers. But since the mid-1990s, the Heideggero-Derridean brand of continental thought has faced increasing competition from new trends: initially from the books of Gilles Deleuze, and more recently from the heterodox tag team of Alain Badiou and a resurgent Slavoj Žižek. While major works by these “new” authors have been available for many years, what is more recent is their increased momentum among the younger generation of continental philosophers. In terms of background and orientation, Meillassoux is not difficult to place among these currents. He was a student of Badiou, and the preface to the book is written by Badiou himself, who can barely find sufficient words to praise it—by fusing absolute logical necessity with a radical contingency of the laws of nature, Meillassoux is said to “open in the history of philosophy . . . a new path foreign to Kant's canonical distribution between ‘dogmatism,’ ‘scepticism,’ and ‘critique.’”³ Furthermore, despite the absence of set-theory notation and other known Badiouian flourishes, there are obvious points of similarity between teacher and student: the major role for mathematics, including the anointment of Georg Cantor as a pivotal figure for philosophy; the fondness for step-by-step logical argumentation; the absence of any especial interest in Heidegger or the phenomenological tradition. Both authors also display grand systematic ambitions of a kind that seemed unthinkable in our field a short time ago. Nonetheless, Meillassoux's vision of the world is not Badiou's, and certain aspects of the former even cut against the grain of the latter. According to published information, Meillassoux was born in 1967 in Paris, son of the economic anthropologist Claude Meillassoux (1925–2005), an intellectual maverick in his own

right. He is a graduate of the Ecole Normale Supérieure, and has been employed at that institution for the past decade. Although *Après la finitude* is Quentin Meillassoux's first book, anecdotal evidence suggests that he was generally known and highly regarded in Paris well beyond Badiou's circle even before the book appeared.

The very title *After Finitude* will be enough to startle present-day continental thought, since human finitude has been perhaps the central credo of the field from the time of its birth. The book consists of two opening critical chapters followed by two longer and more systematic chapters, closing with a short fifth chapter that harks back to the opening critique. Since Meillassoux himself agrees that Chapters 1, 2, and 5 can be taken as a unit,⁴ quite apart from whether the reader accepts the philosophical standpoint outlined in Chapters 3 and 4, the present review is organized according to this schema. Beginning with Meillassoux's onslaught against the Copernican Revolution of Kant, I will move to his more challenging attempt to establish a mathematical ontology that abandons the principle of sufficient reason, before closing with a brief assessment of the book as a whole.

Against Correlationism

One of the typical features of recent continental thought is its contempt for so-called "naïve realism." The human being is now firmly established as the point of entry for all serious philosophy, even if redefined as a pure ego, linguistic agent, embodied animal, subject of power-plays, or historically rooted Dasein. The notion of an objective world-in-itself seems to elude our grasp. Nonetheless, few authors have faced this predicament with full-blown absolute idealism à la Berkeley—if not quite "naïve," such extreme idealism strikes most of us as gratuitous and bizarre amidst the undeniable blows of the world. This leaves philosophy in an ambiguous position, neither realist nor idealist. The obvious roots of this ambiguity lie in the Copernican Revolution of Kant, still the basic philosophical horizon of both the analytics and the continentals. Meillassoux's book ends with the daring claim that Kant's Revolution is in fact "a Ptolemaic Counter-Revolution (163),"⁵ one that makes

philosophy revolve around humans at the precise moment when modern science had plunged into the world itself. In the wake of Kant's genius, we are too clever to believe in direct access to things in themselves, but also too sober to construct wild solipsistic theories that reduce the world to nothing but our own production. The favored middle-ground position for philosophers has been what Meillassoux calls "correlationism" (18). The correlationist holds that we can neither conceive of humans without world, nor of world without humans, but must root all philosophy in a correlation or rapport between the two.

The term "correlationism" strikes me as a devastating summary of post-Kantian thought. On the continental side, we find Husserl pleading for objectivity against psychologism while also defending ideality against the natural sciences; we have Heidegger claiming that reality neither exists nor fails to exist in the absence of Dasein; more recently, we see Žižek describe the Real as solely a gap in the world posited by the mad human subject, even while denying that he is an idealist. On the analytic side, there is the "as if" of Blackburn's quasi-realism; the internal exile of Putnam's internal realism; and Davidson's refusal to take the realism/anti-realism dispute seriously. All these positions, and countless others, join in allegiance to what Meillassoux calls the "correlational circle" (19). As he wonderfully puts it: "we will henceforth term *correlationism* every current of thought that upholds the uncircumventible character of the correlation understood in this way. Thus, we can say that every philosophy that claims not to be a naïve realism has become a variant of correlationism" (18). The correlationist argument, often left vague or entirely unstated, holds that any attempt to think reality-in-itself automatically turns it into something not in-itself—since, after all, we are now thinking about it (17). On this basis, there is supposedly no way to reach the world *an sich*, but only a global correlation of human and world. Philosophy has lost what Meillassoux calls *le Grand Dehors*, "the Great Outside." In its place, we find that "this space of the outside is hence only the space of that which faces us, of that which exists only on the basis of a vis-à-vis with our own existence. . . . We do not transcend very far beyond ourselves when diving into such a world: we are content

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to explore the two faces of something that remains a face-to-face" (21). This correlate need not take the form of the old subject/object dualism. Indeed, most present-day philosophers unite in heaping scorn upon the antiquated model of subject and object. But this does not prevent them from remaining locked in the modern dance-step of correlationism. In particular, Meillassoux cites Heidegger's supposedly "more originary" correlation of being and thought in *Ereignis* as an example of how the rejection of subject and object does not quite get us off the correlationist hook (22). As Meillassoux sees it, *all* postcritical philosophy is correlationism (23)—or else a relapse into metaphysics, as with Whitehead and perhaps even the vitalism of Deleuze.⁶ Before Kant, philosophers duelled over who had the best model of substance: was it perfect forms, individual beings, prime matter, atoms, or God? Since Kant, these "naïve" disputes have been replaced by combat over who has the best model of the human-world *correlate*: is it subject-object, noesis-noema, Dasein-Sein, or language-referent? In Meillassoux's eyes, "co" has become the dominant particle of the philosopher's lexicon (19), just as "always already" (21) has become the beloved phrase of those who grant extra-human reality only when we ourselves posit it retroactively. Yes, they tell us, the world exists in itself—but only *for us* (26).

The work of Quentin Meillassoux is meant as a clean break with all forms of correlationism, and he approaches the task with unusual boldness. He begins by drawing up a table of actual scientific dates (known to Heideggerians as "mere ontic information"): 13.5 billion years since the Big Bang, 4.45 billion since the formation of the earth, 3.5 billion since life began on our planet, and just two million years since the appearance of *homo habilis* (24). He asks us to consider the status of statements about ancient events predating the relatively recent appearance of human beings, those pampered tyrants of correlational philosophy. For those entities that exist prior to all human life, Meillassoux coins the term "archifossil," and describes them as having "ancestrality" (24–26). In his view, the correlationists will always be at a loss when trying to deal with the ancestral archifossil. Their likely maneuver is a predictable one: the

correlationist will not admit that a being actually *exists* prior to being given to humans, but only that it is *given to humans* as existing prior to such givenness (32). They will say that "the physical universe is not *really* known to precede the existence of humans, or at least the existence of living creatures; the world has meaning only as given to a living or thinking being" (33). They will try to reduce scientific statements about ancestral stellar explosions and mudslides to the means of scientific givenness of these events, just as in positivism or verificationism. "We can therefore say that the statement is true . . . without naively believing that its truth results from an adequation with the actual reality of its referent (a world without givenness of world)" (*ibid.*).

This correlationist attitude toward science is at the same time both modest and condescending. For on the one hand it leaves nature entirely to the sciences, laying no claim to the objective world for philosophy at all. But simultaneously, it holds that there is something more in the world that science cannot grasp (cf. Heidegger's "science does not think")—a "logical" priority of statements about the world over the "chronological" priority of ancestral events themselves (32). In so doing, correlationists play the game of pretending that they do not interfere with the *content* of scientific statements. Yet interfere they do. For if scientific statements about the archifossil are not taken literally, they lose meaning altogether. The statement that the earth was formed 4.5 billion years ago means exactly what it says. It does mean what the correlationists claim, namely that "it is not ancestrality that precedes givenness, it is the present given that retroactively projects a past that seems ancestral" (34). For this is no longer the same statement as that of the scientists, and its supposedly agnostic attitude toward the real world cannot hide a form of crypto-idealism, since it tacitly dismisses all forms of realism as naïve. Although Meillassoux's book does not openly equate correlationism with idealism, he does give an important hint along these lines: "faced with the archifossil, *all idealisms converge and become equally extraordinary*" (36). Insofar as Berkeley, Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida all have equally little to tell us about events on the moon fifty million years ago, they all look like extreme idealists as soon

as the archifossil rears its head. Just as some creationists claim that God planted pseudo-ancient fossils in the ground to test the Biblical faith of scientists, Meillassoux suggests acidly that his notion of the archifossil may serve to “test the philosopher’s faith in the correlates, even in the presence of data that indicate an abyssal gap between that which exists and that which appears” (ibid.). For this reason, the problem of ancestry is capable of overturning everything in philosophy since Kant (37). Moreover, as Meillassoux states at the close of his book, this problem would not disappear even if humans and the world had been created simultaneously—for in this case it still *might* have been otherwise, and hence the archifossil could still be reflected upon as a possibility (156–57). In passing, it should be said that this reformulation is perhaps too limited. It seems to me that the correlationist circle would be threatened not just by archifossils dating to before the emergence of the human species, but equally so by “extrafossils” lying outside current human access, such as objects locked in hidden vaults or refrigerators, or unknown oil reserves trapped beneath the ocean floor. After all, events unfolding right now in the core of Alpha Centauri actually happen inside that star, and not in the core of Alpha Centauri “for us.”

In any case, Meillassoux holds that correlationism and naïve realism are two separate ways of dodging the question of ancestry (38). By contrast with his detailed analysis of correlationism, his arguments against naïve realism are somewhat sketchy throughout the book, though this can perhaps be explained by the limited number of naïve realists practicing philosophy today. Meillassoux insists that philosophy must seek nothing less than the absolute, abandoning its fixation on the transcendental conditions of human experience (39). Nonetheless, “we can no longer be metaphysicians, we can no longer be dogmatists. On this point, we can only be the heirs of Kantianism” (40).

The great failing of metaphysics, for Meillassoux, is that it always seeks some particular necessary being; in this respect, he seems in accord with the Heidegger/Derrida critique of ontotheology. As can be seen from the history of ontological proofs for the existence of God, metaphysics holds that at least one being must

be necessary. The Leibnizian principle of sufficient reason goes even further, entailing that all beings are necessary. But for Meillassoux, “the rejection of dogmatic metaphysics means the rejection of *all* real necessity: and *a fortiori* the rejection of the principle of reason, as well as the ontological proof” (46). What disappears in his argument is the Heideggerian appeal to the limits of finitude, or the postmodernist’s agnostic uncertainty as to whether there is any necessity out there or not. As we will see below, Meillassoux holds that the laws of nature must *be absolutely contingent*. In this manner, without relapsing into the dogmatic tradition he loathes, Meillassoux restores a style of absolutist argument to continental philosophy that has been absent for decades, if not centuries.

Setting the table for his own position, Meillassoux draws a convincing distinction between “weak” and “strong” versions of correlationism. A good example of a weak correlationist is Kant, for whom the things themselves cannot be known, but can at least be thought. Kant’s critical position “does not forbid all connection of thought with the absolute” (48). By contrast, strong correlationism (which includes most continental thinkers of the present day), holds that “it is *equally* illegitimate to claim that we are able, at least, *to think* [the in-itself]” (ibid.). The strong correlationist and the full-blown idealist agree that things themselves are not even thinkable. But whereas the hyper-idealist holds that we gain the absolute through the very conditions of all human thought, the strong correlationist refuses to follow, and is resigned to the facticity or finitude of human experience, devoid of all reference to the absolute. In other words, strong correlationism abandons Kant by holding that “just as we can only describe the *a priori* forms of sensibility and understanding, we can only describe the logical principles inherent in any thinkable proposition, but not deduce their absolute truth” (53). The result is a philosophy of facticity, which “is concerned with the supposed structural invariants of the world—invariants that can differ from one correlationism to another, but which play in each case the role of a minimal prescriptive order for thought: the principle of causality, the forms of perception, logical laws” (54). These invariant forms are taken as

a purely given fact of which no change is ever experienced, but they are not thereby taken as something absolute. They are merely found and described—the basic Kantian method still used by strong correlationism in our own time, as in Heidegger’s existential analytic of Dasein. Breaking with this tradition of factual description, Meillassoux wants to turn facticity into absolute contingency: “*contingency* signifies the fact that physical laws indifferently permit an event either to occur or not to occur—permit a being to arise, endure, or perish” (ibid.).

Meillassoux notes a close link between facticity and the postmodern brand of philosophical religiosity. Stripped of all access to the absolute, the philosophy of finitude seems impeccably modest in its claims about the world. But this attitude is by no means harmless, since it really allows us to make any statements about the absolute that we please. As he puts it, “the end of metaphysics conceived as a ‘de-absolutization of thought’ thus consists in the legitimation by reason of any religious (or ‘poetico-religious’) belief in the absolute whatever” (64), on the sole condition that no one claim to give rational grounds for such belief. The end of metaphysics, in banishing all traces of the absolute from philosophy, has in fact opened philosophy to the dominance of an exacerbated form of religiosity—in which philosophy becomes the handmaid of a correlationist theology of the shapeless Beyond, unfettered by even the barest logical constraints. Whereas a Christian disciple of Kant at least needed to demonstrate that the Trinity is not logically contradictory (60), even this minimal obligation has now vanished. Strong correlationism’s apparent modesty toward the absolute has in fact opened the gates to every possible form of arbitrary belief. As Meillassoux puts it, in what may prove to be the most popular phrase of his book: “the better armed thought is against dogmatism, the more powerless it seems to be against fanaticism” (67). Stripped of all logical armament thanks to the strong correlationists, we are left with nothing but meager critiques of fanaticism in purely moral terms, reduced to complaining about the arrogance or bad practical effects of whichever fanatics we happen to dislike (65).

Against this empty fideism (which is found even in self-proclaimed atheists), and against violent fanaticism as its key historical symptom, “it is important to rediscover in philosophy *a touch of the absolute*” (68). This appeal to the absolute has not been heard in continental philosophy for a good long time, but Meillassoux is serious. Despite his obvious admiration for Kant, he refers to “the Kantian catastrophe” (171) in philosophy, by which he means the correlationist catastrophe. The great hope of Meillassoux’s book, as proclaimed in its final sentences, is that the theme of ancestral things themselves might awaken us from our “correlational slumber” (178). Against the post-Kantian assumption that philosophers must “content [themselves] with showing the general conditions of givenness of phenomena” (174), ancestral events must be regarded as existing in themselves, not just as events for us. Instead of the transcendental idealism that silently dominates philosophy in our time, Meillassoux advocates a “speculative materialism” (169). While this phrase is little developed in the present book, it is sufficiently apt as a description of his standpoint that I would expect it to return in force in his future works.

But Meillassoux does not leave us hanging with these critical arguments against correlationism. He also gives us a considerable taste of his own philosophy, in which “it is a matter of holding firmly to the Cartesian thesis that whatever can be mathematized can be absolutized, without reviving the principle of reason. And this strikes us as a task that is not only possible, but urgent” (175). The essential criteria of all mathematical statements will be transformed into necessary conditions of the contingency of every being. This notion harks back to the opening words of Meillassoux’s book, deliberately unmentioned until now: “The theory of primary and secondary qualities seems to belong to a hopelessly out-of-date philosophical past. It is time to rehabilitate it” (13). Secondary qualities, of course, are those held to exist only in relation to a perceiver, whereas primary qualities are those that exist outside of all perception. While strong correlationism gives a *de facto* endorsement of Berkeley’s view that all qualities exist only in their relation to a perceiver, Meillassoux restores to the world “a touch of the absolute” by arguing that “for anything in

the object that can be formulated in mathematical terms, it is meaningful to speak of it as a property of the object in-itself" (16). In short, Meillassoux's speculative materialism is an attempt to fuse absolute mathematical necessity with an equally absolute contingency of beings in the natural world. We will now examine the way that he reaches this strange hybrid position.

Meillassoux's Speculative Position

Chapters 3 and 4 give us the heart of Meillassoux's argument, and presumably the seeds of his future work as well. We have seen that correlationist philosophy undercuts naïve realism by holding that humans and the world (or their more sophisticated variants) make sense only as codependent terms. Yet by reducing ancestral reality to reality-for-us, correlationism fails to do it justice. One approach to this impasse would be a kind of subjective idealism. Namely, we could decide that the facticity of the human/world correlate gives us a new kind of absolute, one that comprises a novel form of the *an sich*. We would then have an actual new form of knowledge, not just a limitation on knowledge; the *an sich* would no longer lie in some inaccessible beyond, but would be unveiled from the structural features of the correlate itself (72).

Meillassoux rejects this option, since it is no better suited than strong correlationism to describing the ancestral independence of the world. Instead, in the key maneuver of the book, he shifts our focus from the conditions of the correlate back to the things of the world: "the supreme necessity of the correlational circle is going to appear to us as the contrary of what it seems: facticity will be revealed as a knowledge of the absolute, because *we are going to put back into the things that which we have mistaken for an incapacity of thought*" (72). What Meillassoux intends is to transform the disavowal of sufficient reason from a poignant limitation on finite human knowledge into a positive principle of contingency in the things themselves. As he boldly puts it: "the failure of the principle of reason, from this perspective, thus results quite simply from the *falsity* (the absolute falsity, even) of such a principle. For in truth, nothing has a reason for being and for remaining as it is rather than other-

wise" (73). In place of the famous Leibnizian principle, Meillassoux offers a new principle of absolute *unreason* in the things. The correlationist will respond, of course, that we cannot be sure that things themselves are contingent, but only that they are contingent insofar as we know them. Against this predictable objection, Meillassoux demonstrates that correlationism itself already presupposes the very principle that he advocates. "To oppose [the correlationist], there is only one way to proceed: we need to show that the correlational circle . . . if it is thinkable, itself presupposes the tacit concession that contingency is absolute" (74).

Throughout the book, Meillassoux displays an almost Hegelian gift for counterposing multiple arguments, turning them around from various dizzying angles, and finally selecting a winner for the clearest and subtlest of reasons. Hence, it is no wonder that the central argument of his book hinges on an imaginary discussion between five separate philosophical characters. As if he were setting up a dirty joke or a Brunoesque dialogue between philosophers and clowns, Meillassoux relates the following scenario: two dogmatists—a Christian and an atheist—are arguing about the afterlife, and along comes a correlationist. Each of the dogmatists (I like to imagine them as wearing, respectively, a bishop's outfit and a Jacobin liberty cap) is absolutely sure of his views. Either there is a God who preserves the soul after death, or there is not. The correlationist now walks up and counters both dogmatists with a strict form of agnosticism: for how can either character be so sure of reality-in-itself, given that we are limited to our own human access to the world, unable to penetrate to a world-in-itself lying beyond (75)? But along comes yet another character: a "subjective idealist," who "declares that [the correlationist] upholds a position just as *inconsistent* as those of the [dogmatists]. For all three think that there could be an in-itself radically different from our present state: a God inaccessible to natural reason, or a pure nothingness" (*ibid.*, my italics). Since the subjective idealist makes the human-world correlate utterly absolute, he regards it as impossible even to conceive of its destruction by death: "since an in-itself different from the *for-us* is unthinkable, the idealist proclaims it to be impossible" (*ibid.*). Of all

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four characters, Meillassoux holds that the agnostic correlationist is closest to the truth, since it is only he who realizes that things might well be otherwise than we think. After all, each of the dogmatists is trapped in a particular positive doctrine, and the subjective idealist is trapped in an undogmatic but still prison-like correlate. Only the agnostic acknowledges that death and the afterlife are both thinkable without turning them into dogmatic proclamations.

With the field reduced to a sole survivor, a new rival appears: the speculative philosopher (i.e., Meillassoux himself). This novel figure proceeds to dethrone the correlationist by showing that our possible destruction by death reflects not just the agnostic's limited knowledge, but rather an absolute possibility. How so? The argument runs as follows. Note that the correlationist's agnosticism has to allow for the possibility that one of the two dogmatisms may well be correct. For if he disallows the possible truth of any dogmatism, then he is effectively stating that the correlate is an absolutely unsurpassable horizon—and the subjective idealist wins. Put differently, each of the three other characters allows for only one absolute solution: for the Christian it is the afterlife; for the atheist it is annihilation; for the subjective idealist it is the unsurpassable correlate itself. Initially, it is only the agnostic correlationist who leaves open the possibility that any of these three absolutes may be correct. The speculative philosopher merely adds an additional twist: namely, if the correlationist is to avoid becoming a subjective idealist, he cannot allow the openness of possibilities to be just one possible option among others. The agnostic correlationist's entire argument hinges on replacing absolute Christianity, atheism, or subjective idealism with an absolute openness. And for this reason, he is forced to throw in his lot with Meillassoux's speculative position. After all, the very possibility of distinguishing between a for-us and an in-itself at all requires that it be absolutely possible that there is more to reality than is currently visible in the correlational circle. In short, the agnostic is not an agnostic when it comes to agnosticism, but must be *absolutely* agnostic.

Another way to view the situation is that there are really only two options. Either we

emphasize the contingent facticity of the correlate and thereby remove its absolute status, or we disavow this contingent facticity in order to turn the correlate itself into absolute reality, and thereby become subjective idealists. No middle ground is possible. Meillassoux chooses the former path, arriving at his speculative position by simply radicalizing what the correlationists already presuppose—namely, the possibility that there might be something in-itself different from what appears to us. If we fail to accept this possible difference, then we either absolutize subjective experience (like the subjective idealist) or plunge into our preferred dogma (like the Christian and the atheist). The irony is that Meillassoux goes beyond correlationism by radicalizing its own internal conditions; this has possible implications worth considering at the end of this review. But for anyone who concludes too quickly that this leads him to a metaphysics privileging human being, Meillassoux has a ready counterargument: “we do not contend that it is necessary that some specific being exist, but rather that it is absolutely necessary that *any* being is capable of not existing” (82, *my italics*). If it were otherwise, we would have metaphysics in the bad sense, a humanized ontotheology, whereas “[my] thesis is rather speculative—one thinks an absolute—without being metaphysical—one thinks nothing (no specific being) which *would be* absolute. The absolute is the absolute impossibility of a necessary being” (ibid). The principle of sufficient reason is replaced by a global unreason, an inherently negative term later replaced by the more positive “factuality.” Whereas the facticity of a situation points to its sheer contingency, the very structure of facticity is not itself contingent, and this non-facticity of facticity itself is what is given the name “factual” (107).

Since everything is contingent, it is only the principle of unreason that can be regarded as eternal, absolute, and “anhypothetical” in Aristotle's sense (i.e., one of those things for which no demonstration can or needs to be provided) (84).⁷ Absolute contingency does not mean that “all must perish,” since this would entail a metaphysics of permanent flux, whereas Meillassoux's principle remains neutral on the question of flux versus stasis. His notion of contingency applies equally well to a

Heraclitean universe of fiery flow and an icy Parmenidean cosmos locked in a single permanent form. What his position rejects is the strong correlationist's lingering belief in a cryptic, unknown ground of things: "This belief in the ultimate Reason reveals the true nature of strong correlationism: it is not an abandonment of the principle of reason, but rather the *apology* for a belief in this very principle, a belief that has [simply] become disconnected from reason." By contrast, "speculation consists . . . in *accentuating* the extraction of thought from the principle of reason, even to the point of conferring upon this extraction a principial form, the sole form permitting us to grasp that there is absolutely *no* ultimate Reason—whether thinkable or unthinkable." And even more succinctly, "there is nothing beneath or beyond the manifest gratuity of the given—nothing, except for the limitless and lawless power of its destruction, emergence, and preservation" (86).

Many readers will at first reject this menacing vision of hyper-chaos, with its apparently monstrous consequences. Compared to our usual model of nature, it seems to be such a disaster as to leave no hope of approaching the ancestral realm of science. Indeed, Meillassoux is aware of the possible objection that he has achieved very little—whereas the skeptic already says that the in-itself might be anything at all without our knowing it, speculative thought merely adds that we do know it (88). But this apparently meager addition contains the germ of Meillassoux's entire philosophy. Since he knows that contingency is necessary and eternal, and that *only* contingency is such, his basic philosophical method will consist in deducing all those conditions that a thing must fulfill in order to be contingent (90). As a first step, Meillassoux tries to use his principle of unreason to verify Kant's views that: (a) the in-itself is never contradictory, and (b) that there must be an in-itself. He does this over the course of fifteen subtle pages which are a pleasure to read, but whose exact argumentation cannot be reproduced in a short review like this one. A brief summary of his results will have to suffice. Meillassoux first tries to establish that the in-itself can never be contradictory. He makes the fascinating claim that this goes even beyond Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction, since the Aristotelian prin-

ciple refers only to the unthinkability of contradiction, whereas the contradiction Meillassoux is thinking of should be truly impossible in its own right. He follows an intriguing line of argument to the effect that if contradictory beings existed, they would be necessary—after all, a contradictory being would lack true determinacy, and hence would face no alterity that would render it contingent and limited. Hence they must be impossible, since we have already established an absolute contingency of beings, such that necessary beings are *ipso facto* impossible (92ff.). At this point Meillassoux offers a useful historical comparison that situates his views more clearly. Leibniz upheld the principles of non-contradiction and sufficient reason. On the other side of the coin, we could say that Heidegger and Wittgenstein rejected both principles, since both are strong correlationists who reject any absolute statements about the beyond. Then there is Hegel, who kept the principle of sufficient reason while abandoning non-contradiction. Finally, Meillassoux emerges as a kind of inverse Hegel: defending non-contradiction while abolishing sufficient reason (97).

The second step is to justify Kant's other principle: namely, that there must be an in-itself. This hinges for Meillassoux on the realization that our facticity is not itself just a fact, but is something necessary. To doubt the necessity of my facticity and thereby turn it into something merely contingent and susceptible of mere description, I have to presuppose that my facticity might be otherwise, but this statement contradicts itself. "In order to doubt the necessity of something, I ought in fact to admit, as we have seen, that its facticity is thinkable as absolute. For in order that the world in its entirety should be capable of being thought as not being, or not being such as it is, I ought to admit that its possible non-being, its facticity, is thinkable for me as an absolute (in such a way that it is more than a correlate of thought)" (100). In short, while everything in the world has an absolute facticity, this is not true of facticity itself, which cannot merely be something given and described. Instead, facticity is something that must be deduced, something with a logical necessity that I see no reason not to call a priori. This step into a sphere of logical deductions beyond the con-

tingent finitude of Kantian or phenomenological description, “far from leading to something irrational, allows for the constitution of a space of rather precise problems, in which a *logos* is progressively able to unfold the axes of its argumentation” (107). With the downfall of finitude, we enter a space where philosophy gains renewed confidence in the power of reason and the logical deducibility of numerous truths. Meillassoux, ostensibly an advocate of unreason, is in fact a champion of mathematical reason in the high Cartesian style. Indeed, he seeks a “*passage of truth from the Kantian in-itself to a Cartesian in-itself*” that would take us beyond the logical principle of non-contradiction to an absolutization of mathematical discourse (109). With a tantalizing hint at his future work, Meillassoux concedes that he “cannot present here the full solution to this problem” (ibid.).

In a striking interlude on the nature of philosophy, he states that “philosophy is the invention of strange arguments, necessarily bordering on sophistry—which remains its dark structural double. In fact, philosophizing always consists in deploying an idea that imposes an original argumentative regime in order to be defended or explored” (103). The backbone of Meillassoux’s new way of thinking appears earlier on the same page, in the following lucid summary: “non-metaphysical speculation consists, in the first place, in stating that *the thing in itself is nothing other than the facticity of transcendental forms of representation*. It consists, in the second place, in *deducing* from the absolute status of this facticity the properties that Kant himself was content to accept as evident” (ibid.). In this way, Meillassoux sketches a world in which each thing is contingent and self-contained, capable of being utterly different from what it is, and absolutely unconnected to anything else by any ground or reason. This leads him into a confrontation with David Hume in Chapter 4, since Meillassoux like Hume seems faced with a world of chaos-without-cause. But whereas Hume was concerned only with our inability to know any causal sources of things, Meillassoux faces a more difficult predicament—for he has gone so far as to declare absolutely that there is, in reality itself, no reason.

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If we gaze through the crack that is thereby opened on the absolute, we discover a rather menacing power . . . able to destroy both things and worlds; able to give rise to monsters of illogicism; able just as well never to come about at all; surely able to produce every dream, but every nightmare as well; able to undergo frenetic and disordered changes or, alternatively, to produce a universe immobile down to its innermost recesses. Like a cloud bearing the most fearful tempests, the most unfamiliar lightning-flashes. . . . An Omnipotence equal to that of Descartes’ God, capable of everything, including the inconceivable. But an Omnipotence that would be disordered, blind, divorced from other divine perfections, and rendered autonomous. A power with neither goodness nor wisdom, unable to guarantee to thought that its distinct ideas are true. (87–88)

In other words, the quickest objection to Meillassoux’s position would be that he allows the laws of nature to change wildly and without notice. Many readers will continue to insist that the laws of nature must be necessary—but in a mysterious physical sense that undercuts Meillassoux’s absolute contingency, since he dares to speak of an absolute unreason in the world rather than just a limitation on knowledge. But Meillassoux counters “that we can sincerely accept that objects are capable, *actually and without any reason*, of displaying the most capricious behavior, without thereby modifying the usual everyday relation that we have with things” (114–15). As he sees it, dogmatists, skeptics, and transcendental philosophers all share a belief in causation, with some of them merely doubting that the causal sources of things can be known. He states that the same is true of Hume, who continues to “[believe] blindly in the world that the metaphysicians believed themselves capable of demonstrating” (124). Whether or not one accepts this reading of Hume, it is certainly true that he did not advocate a flat-out absolute contingency of the kind found in the book now being reviewed.

For Meillassoux, the real problem is not the necessity of laws of nature, but their stability, two themes that are easily confused. He reformulate Hume’s problem as follows: “if laws are regarded as contingent and not necessary,

how does it happen that their contingency is not manifest in the form of radical and continuous change?" (125). It is often believed that the apparent constancy of the physical world refutes contingency. After all, if the laws of nature could change, it is assumed that they would have to change frequently. Evidently, they do not; hence, the laws of nature must not be contingent (128–29). To fully overturn this usual line of reasoning, which Meillassoux calls "the frequential implication," he will need to show how stability emerges from out of chaos. In the present book, he confines himself to the negative first step of showing that the frequentialist argument does not work. He takes as his target a book that he greatly admires, written in the early 1980s by one Jean-René Vernes.⁸

Vernes' book, "written in a concise manner worthy of the philosophers of the seventeenth century" (130) (as is equally true of Meillassoux's own book) tries to render more explicit the reasons that Hume and Kant believe in necessary laws. Vernes himself defends the frequentialist argument, but by making it more explicit than his forerunners, Meillassoux thinks he exposes its weaknesses all the more. As Vernes sees it, we are able to pass from the apparent stability of physical laws to their necessity by following a probabilistic line of reasoning. If we imagine the collision of Hume's proverbial billiard balls, we notice a contrast between the countless a priori possibilities of things that could occur when the balls strike one another, and the limited number of repeated deflections that do in fact seem to occur. Posing a strange but fascinating question, Vernes asks why we trust our senses in this case, rather than dismissing the repetition as illusory and trusting instead in the infinite possibilities offered by our reason. The answer, as he sees it, lies in the same principle "which . . . allows a dice-player to suspect . . . that a die that always lands on the same face is *most probably* loaded" (131). We begin by imagining a perfectly fair set of gambler's dice, symmetrical and homogeneous, with no evident reason for one side to turn up more often than any other. We now calculate the probabilities of various dice-throws by means of the following principle: "*that which is equally thinkable is equally possible*. It is this *quantitative* equality of the thinkable and the possi-

ble that permits us to establish a calculus or probability or frequency of an event when we play a game of chance" (132). But if we find to our surprise that a die continues to fall on the same face after an hour's worth of throws, we will surely begin to suspect a secret cause for this result—perhaps a piece of lead hidden inside it. Our suspicions will surely increase if we learn that the die has fallen on the same face for our entire lifetimes, or in all of human memory: especially if we are playing with a die having millions or trillions of faces rather than the usual six. What impels our belief in a secret cause is the apparent contrast between the countless possible results of the dice-throw and the single outcome that recurs repeatedly. Like our imaginary gambler, Hume and Kant assume that if there were true contingency in the dice-throw, it ought to be manifest in the form of wildly varying results. Essentially, they take the probabilistic reasoning with which a gambler concludes that a die is loaded, and transfer it to the universe as a whole. Out of an immense total of thinkable (i.e., non-contradictory) universes, the familiar conditions of our own universe always seem to be repeated. Even when cutting-edge physics uncovers some bizarre new phenomenon, this merely gives unexpected insight into our existing universe; no one thinks that it marks a chaotic transformation in the very laws of our universe. From all of this, one concludes that there must be some extra-logical, extra-mathematical force governing the "universe-die" so as to give it the constant conditions that we witness. Vernes calls this secret force "matter," but Meillassoux finds it so vague and mysterious that we might just as well call it "providence" (134). In any case, the inference of Hume and Kant runs as follows: "if the laws *are actually capable of being modified without reason*, it would be 'infinitely' improbable that they are not modified *frequently*" (ibid.).

Meillassoux's critique of this inference is highly inventive, though not as immediately convincing (to me, at least) as some of the other arguments in his book. As he sees it, the basic presupposition of the "frequentialist" standpoint is that it equates the being of the possible with the being of a total conceivable numerical sum of possibilities—even if this sum is regarded as infinite. And "this line of probabilist reasoning is valid only on the con-

dition that what is possible *a priori* is thinkable in the manner of a *numerical totality*" (139). In order for Vernes' defense of Hume and Kant to work, he needs to assume that the sum total of conceivable events is greater than the total stock of experimental results. The larger the total of possible events, or the larger the number of faces on the universe-die, all the greater is the probability that the stable universe of our experience results from a cryptic physical necessity lying hidden from view. It is here that Meillassoux invokes Cantor, and Badiou's philosophical appropriation of him, in an effort to undercut the supposition that we can speak of a totality of possible events at all (139–42). The quantity of quantities is not just too big to think about—it actually does not exist in light of the endless series of transfinite numbers, none of them ever the greatest possible one (144). In other words, there is no sum of possibilities, and hence the basically statistical argument of the frequentialists collapses. Or at least this is true under at least one axiomatic system (Meillassoux, like Badiou, cites Zermelo-Fraenkel [142]), and this is enough to suspend any overwhelming discrepancy between a limited pattern of recurring physical events and a mighty ocean of total possible conceivable events. Moreover, any theory of chance always relies on the deeper assumption of an underlying physical law within which chance plays out:

an aleatory series can be constituted only on condition that the die preserves its structure from one throw to the next, and that the laws that permit the throws to take place are not modified from one roll to the next. If the die were to implode, become spherical or flat, multiply its faces by a thousandfold, etc., from one throw to the next; or if gravity ceased to act and the die flew off into the air, or were projected instead beneath the surface of the earth, etc., from one throw to the next; if this were so, no aleatory series, no calculus of probabilities, could ever take place. (135–56)

That is to say, even the wildest games of chance unfold only within a field defined by certain unvarying laws. But Meillassoux's views on absolute contingency prevent us from taking refuge in any final ground of necessary physical laws, since this would presup-

pose the very issue under dispute. In this way, stripped of its framework of necessity, true chance even becomes impossible.

As I read it, Meillassoux's present book merely tries to show that the apparent stability of physical events in no way implies their necessity. As he himself admits, what is needed to make his unorthodox stance on nature fully convincing is to show a way for stability to arise despite absolute contingency. This would then allow us to apply Ockham's Razor to any fruitless appeal to cryptic physical mechanisms (148). But *Après la finitude* only lays the groundwork for such a tactic, since it does not firmly establish the needed resolution to Hume's problem: "for a . . . proposed resolution of Hume's problem would be obliged to derive the non-totalizability of the possible *from the principle of factuality itself*" (152). Yet there is little cause for complaint, since this short book already achieves so much that most readers will gladly wait a few more years for a fuller treatment of contingency.

In closing these middle sections of the book (we have dealt with the final chapter above), Meillassoux insists that the famous problems of metaphysics are real, and deserve to be treated with respect. It is no longer a true philosophical attitude to smirk ironically at questions from beginners such as "who are we?" or "where do we come from?" (151). In his view (as in my own), the recent tendency by philosophers to smirk at supposed "pseudo-problems" is merely a result of the correlational circle—which confines itself to an increasingly decrepit citadel of human access to the world, and regards as "naïve" any attempt to venture into a supposed wasteland-in-itself beyond the fortress. But while Meillassoux does not find metaphysical questions naïve or meaningless, he also does not find them mysterious: "there is no longer any mystery, not because there is no longer any problem, but because there is no longer any reason" (152). In his eyes, what philosophy most needs is an absolute and mathematized Cartesian version of the *an sich*, not just a mysteriously withdrawn Kantian one: a "mathematical and not merely logical restoration of a reality regarded as independent of the existence of thought" (153). This mathematized absolute will provide the key for bridging what Meillassoux regards as the two central themes of his book, and perhaps of

his thinking in general: (1) the ancestral archifossil, and (2) the problem of how stability emerges from absolute contingency (ibid.).

Hyper-Occasionalism

Anyone familiar with recent continental philosophy is likely to find Meillassoux's book refreshing. He abandons the more or less cautious hermeneutics of human finitude that Heidegger established as a basic philosophical method, replacing it with remorseless logical deduction. Stylistically, he prefers rational argumentation to the "close reading" exegesis of classic texts, and in this respect he has much in common with mainstream analytic thought. He captures the reader's attention by minutely describing the contours of any philosophical position, depicting it from numerous angles by means of variant and contrary positions, employing a wealth of brilliant counterarguments that often flood the reader's mind even before the initial position has been mastered. In this sense, Meillassoux shows both a Hegelian talent for dialectical variation and a Cartesian gift for lucid, step-by-step inference. And while his faith in reason and contempt for obscurantism may strike some readers as too confident in our power to fathom the depths of the world, this style of thinking is a badly needed counterpoint to the dominant music of infinite otherness and withdrawn grounds beneath grounds that has become the near-ubiquitous soundtrack of continental philosophy. Best of all, Meillassoux never passes the buck to dead mentors or hedges his bets behind meandering prose; he sticks his neck out in every section of the book, and most available knives are too dull to place him in any danger. For this reader at least, *Après la finitude* opens unheard-of possibilities for the future of French philosophy, and tends to restore a good deal of optimism concerning the power of human reason to know the world. Challenges of this order come only from works of the highest intellectual caliber.

Meillassoux is an explicit champion of what he calls hyper-chaos, or perhaps hyper-contingency. Only while writing this review did it occur to me that this actually makes him a *hyper-occasionalist*, perhaps the most extreme occasionalist who has ever lived. Since this

claim will sound as strange to the reader as to Meillassoux himself, it calls for a bit of explanation.

Occasionalism is generally remembered as a minor, dusty, and gratuitous theological doctrine in which God intervenes at every moment to link mind and body, and more generally to link any objects at all. It is often restricted to Malebranche and a small number of his intellectual cousins. Indeed, specialists in modern philosophy often strike down all efforts to apply this term even to Descartes, let alone to Spinoza, Leibniz, and Berkeley. In my view, this restriction is unjustified, and the term should be given a far broader scope than is normally the case. For what is most pivotal about occasionalism is not any particular theology, but rather the idea that entities in the world exist only side by side, without any connection with one another. This model is obviously found not only in Islamic figures such as al-Ash'ari and al-Ghazali, and full-blown Christian occasionalists such as Malebranche, but in a broad range of modern philosophers. As Steven Nadler has shown,⁹ precisely the same argument about the side-by-side character of things is even what guides Hume and his medieval forerunner Nicolas d'Autrécourt. Strictly speaking, occasionalism in its purest form would be impossible, since we would be left with a multitude of side-by-side micro-universes, none of them communicating with the others in even the least fashion. This is why each form of occasionalism has had to allow itself a single hypocritical exception to the usual ban on interaction. For the theological occasionalists, this exception is obviously God, who is granted the unique ability to affect the things in the world: even fire cannot burn cotton, but God can make it burn. In "skeptical occasionalists" such as Hume, the hypocritical exception is found in the human mind, which links fire and cotton through the force of custom (even if nothing in the outside world corresponds to such a link).

Meillassoux's philosophy can be read as a more extreme form of occasionalism than either of these schools. In his system there is no God able to do what inherent causal power cannot accomplish, since he excludes all necessary beings. Nor does he merely say, with Hume, that we "cannot know" whether causal powers exist—after all, Meillassoux states ab-

solutely that there is no reason, no cause for anything to happen. His occasionalism is not merely a de-linking of distinct entities viewed from the standpoint of human knowledge, but an explicit decree about the ancestral things themselves. He leaves us with a cosmos of utterly isolated entities, none capable of exerting determinative forces against the others.

It remains to be seen how Meillassoux's future work will explain the emergence of apparent stability in nature from the hyper-contingency to which he feels bound. For the moment, however, there is a possible objection to his manner of stating the problem. He argues convincingly that philosophy is capable of absolute statements about things themselves, and is in no way confined to the correlationist's things themselves "for us." Even so, the ancestral realm in his work still functions solely as a mechanism for absolutizing the correlational circle; indeed, his method of obtaining the absolute arises directly from a radicalization of the correlational predicament itself. In this respect, he seems more concerned with the absolute status of scientific knowledge of the things themselves than with the ontological structure of these things apart from all knowledge. If this objection seems too subtle, it becomes more vivid if we ask about the relation of ancestral things with each other rather than just their inability to be reduced to a human-world correlate. Nowhere in the present book do we find a discussion of how the ancestral structure of fire exceeds its relation to cotton; for Meillassoux it is only human knowledge, not relationality in general, that finds itself perplexed by the archifossil. Stated differently, the problem is not just why it seems to us that fire always burns cotton even though there is absolutely no reason for this to happen. The real problem is why fire and cotton themselves are able to give rise to an event even though there is no longer

any connection between these two entities. In other words, causation is not just an apparent phenomenon that arises in human awareness without reason, but something that actually unfolds between entities themselves without reason. In the current version of Meillassoux's project, there remains the possible objection that, even though the archifossil is something existing entirely in itself, independently of all correlation or rapport, it is still invoked only as the dark excess or underbelly of the correlate itself. An analogous problem is found in Badiou's "inconsistent multiplicity,"¹⁰ which seems to do nothing other than constantly undercut the human count-as-one and occasionally surprise us in various novel truth-events. If inconsistent multiplicity merely remains beyond all counts as a non-totalizable excess, and no part of it ever acts against any other part, it thereby effectively functions as a *one* despite Badiou's claims to the contrary. More importantly, it will have no structure in its own right, and we will find ourselves saying almost nothing about the nature of the world itself. A true hyper-occasionalism would have to avoid relapse into human knowledge as the single ultimate arbiter of a world without sufficient reason. This can happen only if we deal explicitly with the interaction of separate inanimate entities outside the scope of human awareness—including ancestral scientific knowledge.

Although I would not call this difficulty "minor," it is still a specific and limited issue, and one fully open to debate. *Après la finitude* is an important book of philosophy by an author who is clearly one of the most talented emerging voices in continental thought. Quentin Meillassoux deserves our close attention in the years to come, and his book deserves rapid translation and widespread discussion in the English-speaking world. There is nothing quite like it.

ENDNOTES

1. Quentin, Meillassoux, *Après la finitude: Essai sur la nécessité de la contingence*, with a Preface by Alain Badiou (Paris: Seuil, 2006.) All translations from the French are my own. Thanks are due to Ray Brassier of Middlesex University for numerous stimulating discussions of the book, and for drawing
2. This information comes from Brassier himself, e-mail to the author on August 21, 2006.
3. From page 11 of Badiou's Preface. Meillassoux also receives five respectful citations in Badiou's new major work *Logiques des mondes* (Paris: Editions de

- Seuil, 2006), on pages 129, 534, 577, 589, and 624.
4. "I propose one path, but the interest of *Après la finitude* is that the reader can agree with the three critical chapters on correlationism (1, 2, 5) without being obliged to accept my own solution for escaping it. It remains for each reader to see if he can experiment with other paths." From Meillassoux's e-mail to the author on June 9, 2006.
 5. Analogous sentiments can be found throughout Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. C. Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
 6. From an e-mail to the author on July 6, 2006.
 7. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book Gamma, section 4.
 8. Jean-René Vernes, *Critique de la raison aléatoire, ou Descartes contra Kant*, with a Preface by Paul Ricoeur (Paris: Aubier, 1982).
 9. Steven Nadler, "'No Necessary Connection': The Medieval Roots of the Occasionalist Roots of Hume," *The Monist* 79 (1996): 448–66.
 10. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005).

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