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A Return to the Pre-critical? On Meillassoux's Speculative Realism and a More General Problem¹

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Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, France continuously took center stage in contemporary philosophy. Existentialism, structuralism, post-structuralism, theoretical psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and so forth—these are only the most celebrated schools of thought setting the tone of theoretical debate all around the world. The conceptual productivity of French theory in that particular period was so massive that Badiou declared it one of the three “moments” in the history of philosophy, along with Greek philosophy from Socrates to Aristotle and Classical German philosophy from Kant to Hegel.²

But an event is essentially determined in space and time. As the last philosophical giants little by little disappeared, the heroic era was evidently coming to an end. Not that French theory is done and dusted. However, due to various reasons, and in spite of the multinational academic apparatus built around it, its inheritors have been unable to show the same theoretical incisiveness. Even Badiou, the only one still reputed to be the proper inheritor of the school, increasingly acts only as the appointed manager of the legacy rather than its true theoretical continuer.

In this constellation, the publication of the book *After Finitude* by Quentin Meillassoux in 2006 triggered a sigh of relief. Finally, it seemed, there was again a powerful author who indisputably dared to walk his path alone and pretended to institute his own philosophical project, “speculative realism,” which might eventually develop into a complete theoretical platform.

The spatial and temporal vicinity of Meillassoux's work to French theory must not mislead us, however. Both in style and content, Meillassoux is the very opposite of what one would expect under the heading “French theory.” While the latter is usually marked by an ornamental train of thought, packed with self-indulgent phrasing and flirtation with poetry, Meillassoux follows a far more traditional ideal of rigorous, almost deductive reasoning. Similarly, if there is anything that French theory constantly derides as an erroneous theoretical stance, it is the pretension to grasp the world as it is in itself. From the Copernican turn onward, the doctrine of naive realism has been considered the foundational assumption to be abandoned if we are to enter into the realm of thought. But if this represents the standard post-Kantian pattern of thought,

Meillassoux turns vehemently against it. His goal is no more and no less than to rehabilitate the absolute into philosophy: to justify our ability to cognize the things as they are in themselves, independently of our cognition, and to reclaim the univocity of language so that no philosophical subtlety could transform it into its alleged true meaning.

The task is enormous and the stakes are high. Meillassoux tries to kill two birds with one stone: post-Kantian philosophy in general and contemporary French thought in particular. In this respect, there can be no common denominator between French theory and his project. And if we were to seek something “French” in his philosophy, we would have to go very far back into the past, up to Descartes—who, in his long winter night that was to become the inauguration scene of modern philosophy, relying only on the power of clear and distinct ideas, tried to achieve completely certain knowledge of things in themselves.

Where does Meillassoux’s radicalism come from?

Meillassoux does not hide his conviction that Kant’s so-called Copernican turn is misguided. While Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud all gradually deprived man of his privileged status, Kant, on the contrary, placed the thinking subject back into the center around which all objects of possible cognition rotate. This fundamental deviation from the Enlightenment project has inevitably had far-reaching theoretical consequences, providing external motives for Meillassoux’s project of speculative realism. By renouncing the absolute, philosophy has given up what has always constituted the goal of all its endeavors, and in this way, it has given up itself. As Meillassoux would put it, a thought is either strong or it is not a thought at all. In addition, the restriction of the domain of certain knowledge has further deepened the split between philosophy and science (and partly between philosophy and common sense) up to the point that nowadays they seem to inhabit two completely separate worlds, with no bridges to connect them. At this point, Meillassoux re-emphasizes that it is only in science that philosophy can find its true ally, which is why it has to retain a positive relation towards it. Even if philosophy does not share the same spontaneous faith in the capacity of science to grasp the world as it is in itself, it should still be able to explain where the relative success of science in handling the world stems from.³

Finally, the self-imposed limitation of reason championed by various strains of post-Kantian thought conferred philosophical dignity on conspiracy theories, undermining the very foundations of rational argumentation. If our knowledge is filtered through subjective forms of thought, which have their real foundation in positive elements of the world—for example in the class struggle, in the will to power, in various drives—then the legacy of rational argumentation is bound to be nothing but a pretext for something else. Accordingly, when confronted with rational arguments, we first ask ourselves why someone is asserting what they are asserting, and instead of dealing with the reasoning in their argumentation, our primary philosophical task is to unmask the true forces behind their assertions, the hidden motives of rational discourse in general. Philosophy is thus reduced to detective work.

If, on the other hand, subjective forms of thought remain without any firm justification, as is mostly the case today, the situation is actually much worse: rational discourse becomes but one of the many language games, which, in principle, has no

priority over any other language game. The difference between philosophical geniality and rational discourse becomes blurred, and eventually even mystical experience can be recognized as an equally proper means to grasp the truth. Along these lines, inspired speech might even gain the advantage over rational argumentation. For while reason is sometimes bound to acknowledge that the knowledge obtained under its own criteria cannot be completely justified, non-rational knowledge is burdened with no inner deficiency of such kind. Since its criteria of truth are far more modest and much less rigorous, they can also be satisfied far more easily. Thus a paradoxical situation can occur, where non-rational knowledge pretends to be more rational than rational knowledge itself, and where understanding gives legitimacy to every kind of assertion, no matter how eccentric, provided that it does *not* acknowledge the requirements of rationality.

It seems that this sort of self-imposed blockade of rational discourse is one of the main external reasons for Meillassoux's endeavor to give philosophy back its taste for the absolute. In what follows, we are first going to sketch a basic outline of Meillassoux's project as presented in his first book and some of his later writings; then we are going to verify the internal and external coherence of the project as a whole; and finally, we are going to sketch some general implications of its failure for contemporary philosophy.

I

1. As far as we can estimate, three observations lie at the very core of speculative realism. Whilst they do not enter into the construction of the argument proper, they act as external guidance and tacitly establish criteria that have to be met by every system of thought that would be able to come forward as philosophy.

The first observation formulates the fundamental result of the Kantian turn: an object can be grasped only through the subject's thinking, and so it is always already thought from the standpoint of the subject (and not as it is in itself). The thesis, in its straightforwardness, appears to be irrefutable, since the very insistence on the accessibility of the "in-itself" brings about a pragmatic contradiction. As soon as we start thinking the object as something in itself, it is us, the thinking subjects, that think the object, which thereby ceases to be "in itself." Meillassoux calls this the correlationist thesis.

The second observation highlights a banal yet neglected fact, which has, according to Meillassoux, the most far-reaching theoretical implications. The scientific practice and everyday language both strongly suggest that we are nevertheless capable of thinking states which imply a non-existence of the subject and consequently of the correlation as such. To begin with, there are assertions and facts pertaining to a time before the appearance of the human species and the formation of intelligent life on Earth in general. Such statements—for instance, that our planet was formed 4.5 billion years ago—are distinguishable in the respect that in the time they describe, there was no possible subjective standpoint from which they could be formulated. Thus, they imply an a-subjective and absolute world. Structurally equal situations can be adduced both for the present and the future. However, since the distant past has the advantage

of being more obvious when compared to the present, we shall follow Meillassoux in calling this thesis the ancestral thesis.

The third and final observation concerns the major rupture in the conception of philosophy brought about by Kant's refutation of the ontological proof. In his critique, Kant demonstrated that it is impossible to infer the existence of a necessary being from concepts alone—but for Meillassoux, he demonstrated much more. According to his reading, Kant's critique of the ontological proof implies that the very concept of a necessary being is indeed impossible. There can be no thing that exists necessarily. But as according to Meillassoux, metaphysics is characterized precisely by postulating a being that is, as *causa sui*, absolutely necessary, the above claim is tantamount to the impossibility of metaphysics. This does not mean that there is no longer any room for necessity in philosophy; it does mean, however, that this necessity must not imply *some thing* that would be necessary. Since Meillassoux considers this type of philosophy as speculative philosophy, we can call the thesis on the impossibility of something existing by necessity the speculative thesis.

The three theses—the correlationist, the ancestral, and the speculative thesis—raise a peculiar problem, however. They are not compatible. The first two, in particular, are in obvious contradiction. Whereas the first one asserts the essential subjective mediateness of every (known) object, the second one implies the (known) object's independence of any kind of subject. And since the two theses logically exclude each other, yet at the same time seem to be equally well justified, we are, in a sense, faced with a typical Kantian antinomy, the antinomy of ancestrality.

Of course, Meillassoux knows very well that many correlationist systems, from transcendental idealism to phenomenology, denied the soundness of this antinomy. Consequently, they developed more or less sophisticated strategies to allow for the inclusion of ancestral statements into our always already subjective world. It is possible to claim, for instance, that the true subject of our statements does not refer to us, finite rational beings, but to some supra-individual subject—call it god, or the absolute spirit—who exists eternally and is immediately present to each and every event. And since we ultimately belong to him, this world proves to be ours nonetheless! Similarly, it is possible to introduce various discursive finesses and uncover the deeper meanings underneath the literal meanings of statements, which can be brought to the surface precisely by the efforts of philosophy. This would imply that, strictly speaking, there were no ancestral events after all, at least not in the literal, naive meaning of the word. In this sense, we could speak about them only from our current (essentially subjective) standpoint and to the extent to which it is possible for us to re-construct the relevant past by moving backwards.

But if the first defense strategy proves to be unfeasible since it is manifestly metaphysical (contrary to the third thesis, it introduces the existence of a necessary being), Meillassoux points out that the second strategy, too, has devastating consequences: it threatens the complete collapse of the world of sense and meaning. For the ancestral assertions, taken literally, do not refer to some distant past, they refer to the past that is supposed to have existed before our time in its entirety. Having that in mind, we can easily see how the alleged philosophical explanation, far from deepening the literal meanings of those assertions, rather turns them upside down. If

we accept this kind of retrojection, we have to infer the peculiar idea that, in the past, time lapsed in two directions simultaneously—from the past to the present, and vice versa. Furthermore, we have to allow for the idea of a specific category of the past, a past that, contrary to the familiar past that once used to be present, has never been present, an eternal past, as it were, without being able to explain when and how (in which direction) the transition between the two temporalities took place.

The proposed solution thus turns out to be even worse than the problem itself. Far from saving the phenomena, the introduction of the two levels of meaning produces a pile of nonsense and in the end literally “goes mad.”⁴ Consequently, if the world of meaning is to be preserved, we should take the ancestral assertions seriously and accept the obvious—that their literal meanings are their true meanings after all.

It is worth considering this idea a little closer. Meillassoux is well aware that philosophical systems cannot be refuted by appealing to empirical facts. He does not build his argument on the fact that our planet came about 4.5 billion years ago; what he relies on in his inference is rather the mere possibility that this fact could be true. The question he asks is: How are ancestral assertions possible? What are the conditions under which they can possibly make sense? Like Kant in the case of *a priori* synthetic judgments, Meillassoux indicates philosophy would have resolved its questions much earlier had it noticed the existence of this special class of ancestral propositions.

After these preliminary remarks, we are now in a position to give a more detailed formulation of the task that Meillassoux is up against. What he wants is simply to propose a philosophical system that could incorporate all three theses. Since in the antinomy of ancestrality he gives a clear preference to the intelligibility of the absolute in itself, his task is, more precisely, to develop such a version of theoretical access to a-subjective objectivity that would not simply dismiss the correlationist thesis—after all, it is assumed to be justified—but would, on the contrary, appear as a positive consequence of its very acceptance. Such a system would earn the name of speculative realism, standing for the intelligibility of the absolute in itself without having to allow for the existence of a necessary being of any kind.⁵

2. Meillassoux’s argument for breaking through the correlationist circle can be summarized in four steps. Interestingly, the four steps in a sense recapitulate the development of contemporary philosophy in the sequence of Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Meillassoux.

In the first step, we simply accept the validity of the correlationist thesis: the object is an essentially subjectively conditioned object, it is always already thought by a subject, and due to pragmatic contradiction, it is impossible even to think that something a-subjective is possible. What is not thinkable is not possible either.

By accepting the correlationist thesis, we seem to have successfully excluded the possibility that the absolute could be grasped by thought. Yet this is not entirely true. Within the correlationist closure, the absolute is out of reach solely on condition that it is conceived as something that is essentially *uncontaminated* by any subjectivity and is consequently *in itself* exactly to the extent to which it is *not for us*. It is only the outside absolute that is thus excluded. If, therefore, in the second step, we assume that the relation between the absolute and ourselves is one of mutual inclusion, then we should

no longer need to seek the absolute in the beyond, for the absolute is now the correlation as such. We will, of course, continue to speak about the absolute from a subjective point of view; but since the absolute is now supposed to include a subjective dimension, thinking it subjectively will turn out to be the only possible way of grasping it adequately. In a similar vein, we will continue to use the expression “in itself” to refer to the ultimate reality; however, since the “in-itself” is now for the subject, it will cease to be understood in opposition to subjective mediation.

Meillassoux calls this philosophical standpoint subjectivist metaphysics: metaphysics in so far as the correlation assumes the usual features of a necessary being, and subjectivist, one could imagine, because from that standpoint the in-itself is not independent of the subject.⁶ Here, Meillassoux obviously aims at Hegel. It is important to note, however, that under the same heading of subjectivist metaphysics he can include many other philosophical systems as well—from vitalism to Marxism. For that purpose, the absolute spirit simply needs to be replaced by some other absolute subject. It also needs to be emphasized that the standpoint of subjectivist metaphysics insists on the intelligibility of the absolute even after the original correlationist turn. So if we understand correlationism as an endeavor to relativize thought by setting an unsurpassable barrier between the absolute and ourselves, then with subjectivist metaphysics this attempt has been successfully neutralized.

In the third step, there appears a new correlationist attack, this time trying to de-absolutize thought by using the principle of factuality. When we speak about correlation, we have to carefully distinguish between two different aspects of it: correlation as the mere fact that an object is always thought by a subject, i.e., from a subject position, and correlation as the notion that the subject’s thinking is bound to include certain forms of thought which partly condition and determine his relation to the object. It is these forms that subjectivist metaphysics tried to absolutize, ground in some real feature of the world, and thereby demonstrate their necessity. This procedure is bound to fail, the correlationist now adds, since these forms can only be described as facts. In order to establish their real necessity, we would have to step out of them—and that is impossible. What is more, adds Meillassoux as he continues his advances, even if we assume that it is not possible to provide a positive demonstration of the impossibility to prove the necessity of our forms of thought, there still remains the fact that due to our finitude, due to the irreducible facticity of our forms of thought, we can always imagine that those forms of thought could be different than they actually are. Even if we cannot think differently than we actually do, we can still acknowledge the possibility that under different circumstances it would, in principle, be *possible* for us to think differently. We therefore admit that what is “unthinkable for us” is not “impossible in itself,” that something can occur which we cannot think of.

In the correlationist attack, this thesis is not put forward as positive knowledge. We cannot really wrench ourselves from our circle as we cannot think the forms in which, and only in which, it is possible for us to think at all, and if we talk about their facticity, it is their inner facticity we are discussing. We cannot know what lies beyond them, and in the end we cannot really know if there is anything beyond them at all. What we know for certain, however, is that we are finite, limited beings, and from that point we can justifiably infer that these limitations could be different than they are. Although

we cannot explain how it could happen, we also know that, in the end, we cannot know that it could not ever happen. This is roughly how the present state in philosophy could be described: in our postmodern era there is virtually no philosophical school that would dare grant absolute validity to rational thought, calling instead for a humble reservation in thinking which often comes with obscurantism at its back.

It is at the fourth step that Meillassoux finally intervenes in the argument in person. His wager is that subjectivist metaphysics is not the only way to break the correlationist closure. Or, more precisely, that the breaking of the closure, if it was possible once, should be possible at least once more. The first break was achieved by a gesture of absolutization directed at the very point that used to constitute the strength of correlationism—the correlation itself. Meillassoux suggests that a similar gesture should now be undertaken once more, with regard to what correlationism relied on to refute the first absolutization—we should now absolutize facticity itself.

By claiming that the forms of thought could be different than they are, correlationism did two things. First, it asserted a notion which, in its pretension, went quite beyond the correlationist circle—it pretended to speak about the absolute. Second, correlationism allowed for this possibility without being able to provide a positive reason for it, which means that it had no reason. In short, it stated something allegedly absolute without a reason. Meillassoux now asks himself: What if, as a matter of fact, this *is* an adequate description of the absolute in-itself? What if the world is in itself such that everything happens absolutely contingently, without a reason? In this case, the correlationist's previous assertion would not be an expression of our inevitable ignorance regarding the in-itself; on the contrary, it would help us express fundamental knowledge about the world as it is in itself.

This is exactly what Meillassoux affirms! For him, the absolute is facticity. The truth of objects in themselves lies ultimately in the fact that when they are, they are without a reason, and when they start or cease to be, this too happens in an absolutely contingent way and without any reason (or cause, for that matter). The absolute truth of the world is that it is absolute chaos, a chaos so chaotic that it is able to present itself as a completely lawful world, since its only necessity lies in the fact that everything is merely factual. Meillassoux calls this principle the principle of factuality.

At this point, a common objection is bound to arise. Even if things in themselves are ultimately without reason, correlationists may insist, even if they are subjected to a contingency so absolute that anything can indeed happen at any moment, we still cannot *know* this. Since the reasonless picture of the world was not deduced by us, but simply proposed, our assertion can, at best, correspond to the absolute by mere accident. Besides, we can never assert anything positive about things in themselves. However, as Meillassoux points out, it is precisely the correlationist who cannot formulate such an objection (and he seems to be the only one who would want to do it), at least to the extent that he conceives his position to be *not* a matter of mere opinion but the *positive* result of rational derivation. In order to see why a correlationist is not allowed to use the above argument, we have to remind ourselves that, in his view, he has refuted subjectivist metaphysics by applying the principle of factuality, which claims something with absolute pretension. If this were not so, as a philosopher, he would have remained at the standpoint of subjectivist metaphysics. Conversely, if this is a valid

argument for him, if he really considers it possible that the forms of thought could be different than they are, then he is equally obliged to recognize the validity of the next step, forcing him to acknowledge the principle of factuality. The correlationist cannot claim something that is inscribed in the order of the in-itself, even if he does it *per negationem* or under the guise of ignorance, and then again insist on the absolute inaccessibility of the in-itself. He cannot, without any reason, allow some possibility with regard to the absolute, and then again state that it is absolutely inadmissible to claim anything pertaining to the absolute. In any case, he cannot affirm the validity of the refutation of subjectivist metaphysics without at the same time being obligated to make one step further towards the standpoint of speculative realism.

Thus, after the two correlationist attempts at de-absolutization, access to the absolute has been regained. The picture of the absolute has been altered in the process, however. The absolute thus gained is not the one that was conceived by subjectivist metaphysicians such as Hegel, for instance, which was always already permeated by thought and always already included the subjective standpoint: now, it is a materialistic absolute that exists in itself outside any kind of subject. In that respect, the absolute of speculative realism is surprisingly similar to the usual absolute of naive realism, which can be found in everyday consciousness. In another respect, however, it is the very opposite of it. Instead of the world being subjected to the principle of causality, where any event has a sufficient reason why it is so and not otherwise, we now have a world where there is no reason, a world “governed” by the principle of unreason. It is interesting to note that Meillassoux has undergone a similar experience as Hegel before him. If traditional metaphysics was based on two principles, the principle of contradiction and the principle of sufficient reason, it seems that there is a price to be paid for the absolute after its demise. In exchange for the absolute, we are now forced to give up either one or the other. Hegel gave up the principle of contradiction. Meillassoux has given up the principle of reason.

3. Until the project is carried out to its completion, it is impossible to say if the price is perhaps not too high. Meillassoux knows very well that by breaking the correlationist closure, we have come to a point where it seems that all hope inevitably fails in the face of the abyss of reasonless chaos. However, he is strongly convinced that this little piece of the absolute that has been gained will, after the initial phase of destruction, prove sufficient to produce a reconstruction of the fundamental elements constituting the accustomed picture of the world. To conclude the outline of Meillassoux’s framework, let us briefly look at the idea behind his reconstructive derivation, which is supposed to follow the first, destructive, phase.

In this respect, we must first address the reservation regarding the very idea of derivation after the collapse of the traditional framework of rationality. As its name implies, the distinctive feature of rational argumentation is giving reasons. But once an occurrence does not and cannot have any reason, it seems that rational argumentation is out for the count. To counter this kind of hesitation, Meillassoux stresses convincingly that *irraison* is not synonymous with *dérailson*. If accepting the principle of unreason definitely involves some changes in the prevailing conception of rationality, it by no means implies complete abandonment of rationality. In order to see this, we should

remind ourselves that the principle of factuality was not introduced arbitrarily, but rather imposed itself as a *consequence* of a positive argument. It was brought about by the binding force of thought, as an expression of its strength, not its weakness; that is why we can further rely on the same power of thought in order to give a more detailed account of the unreasonable world.⁷

For although the principle of factuality seems to be infinitely scant in its content, it nonetheless contains some conditions which are not trivial at all. And because the principle has presumably been established already, we can start from the basic fact of its truth, and from there on derive all the propositions that constitute the necessary conditions of its possibility. Absolutely true will therefore be everything we have to necessarily assume as true in order to assert the validity of the principle of factuality in its full account—that is to say, that everything in every moment can cease or commence without any reason. Meillassoux calls these conditions of the principle of factuality figures or forms. For now, only two of them have been given an explicit derivation: first, that the principle of contradiction applies to the thing in itself; and second, that in every moment of time there necessarily is, or exists, at least one thing (which, of course, is not a necessary thing itself).

How much of a world can be constructed with such figures is still open. Some assertions made by Meillassoux on various occasions indicate that he wanted to reaffirm Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities, and to give a new foundation to Descartes's claim regarding the absolute truth of everything mathematically thinkable. His reliance on Locke also suggested that he might introduce an analogous distinction between the "in-itself" and "appearance." And since, under the name of the two figures of factuality, he substantiated the absolute validity of the principle of contradiction and the existence of things in themselves—precisely those two propositions that Kant, having limited cognition of the realm of appearances, nonetheless affirmed as true in regards to the very things in themselves—we can assume that Meillassoux intended to develop a dual picture of the world, structurally similar to what we know from Kant's transcendental idealism. However, since Meillassoux no longer seems to be interested in the project, this is nothing but speculation.

II

Proceeding to an immanent examination of speculative realism, let us begin by pointing to a rather peculiar ambiguity. To name his antagonist, Meillassoux coined the word correlationism. Since he uses it repeatedly and without special warning in various key moments of his argumentation ("correlationist circle," "correlationist offensive," etc.), this may give rise to an impression that correlationism refers to a unique and coherent philosophical position. Yet, on a closer look, it soon becomes apparent that this common designation brings together rather diverse elements. Meillassoux, for instance, almost in the guise of definition, writes: "[B]y this neologism, in the first approximation, every position is understood as affirming that it does not make any sense to access a thing independent of thought, on the ground that we cannot extract ourselves from the essential correlation of thought and being that we are always already

in.”⁸ Further on he adds that “we call, more precisely, ‘correlationism’ every endeavor of the de-absolutization of thought.”⁹ The problem is, of course, that the alleged more precise description is not simply a closer specification of the initial approximation, it rather introduces a new feature, which does not have much in common with the original one. As a consequence, it may well happen that a philosophical system which takes the correlationist circle very seriously and even emphasizes its inescapability—up to the point of declaring the very idea of an independent outside thing meaningless and impossible—ends up being described as having exited the correlationist closure. As a symptom of this classification, subjective metaphysics and Hegel, who, “in the first approximation,” represent a paradigmatic correlationist position, then, “more precisely,” show to be its opposite, both fall out. Such weird paradoxes indicate that under the common denominator of correlationism, Meillassoux is, in fact, fighting against two enemies at once—against the standpoint affirming that the absolute is in itself and inaccessible, and against the standpoint claiming that the absolute is not in itself (in the sense of being uncontaminated by us), yet it is accessible. We will return to this point.¹⁰

In the execution of the project there are some difficulties worth mentioning, for instance regarding the correct interpretation of Kant,¹¹ or the unclarity concerning the exact derivation of positive conditions of the principle of factuality.¹² But since they do not affect the conclusiveness of the general argument, they may be left aside. There are three technical problems which do, however, call for a closer examination. The first refers to the validity and effective range of the ancestral example; the second to the consistency of the argument designed by Meillassoux with the intention to break the correlationist closure; and the third, finally, to the conditions of the validity of his argumentative strategy in general.

1. Ancestral events—and “arche-fossils” as their present traces—are not used by Meillassoux as empirical facts. He cites them to testify that there is a certain level of meaning that is effectively and rather regularly attained by common sense and science alike, whereas it remains necessarily inaccessible to philosophy, that is, as long as it continues to persist within the correlationist circle.

Common sense is a dangerous ally, however. Philosophy has always been the one to question precisely what appears to be the most obvious and natural to common sense. In this regard, philosophy is always at least a bit “insane.” The admonition that the entire world of meaning would collapse should philosophy fail to accept the authority of common sense may to that extent even prove to be correct, yet it is of no consequence taken in itself. Rather, this is the normal condition for philosophy, which constantly (and one is tempted to say constitutively) walks on the edge of nonsense and sophistry.¹³

Moreover, it seems that little was actually gained for Meillassoux by transposing the argumentation from the level of possible facts to the level of meaning. Nowadays, common sense and science do not enjoy the privilege sometimes accorded to children—namely, that in their naivety they speak nothing but the truth. Confronted with a certain proposition, philosophy is therefore not obliged to take it in the sense attributed to it by the author; on the contrary, its first task should consist in examining under what conditions such an affirmation could possibly be true, and, consequently,

whether it can be taken seriously in its literal meaning at all. The criteria for that may, of course, vary across different systems. It is important to note, however, that such criteria have to be met if we are to take a proposition seriously; and it is pertinent to remind ourselves that, among philosophers, one of the most prominent criteria was furnished by Kant with his contention that it is only through relation to possible experience that our concepts acquire sense and meaning.¹⁴ Yet if this is the case, then the transposition from the level of possible facts to the level of meaning brings no advantage by itself, since in order to justify the very meaningfulness of ancestral propositions, we have to first show that they do indeed refer to a possible experience. It turns out that this is precisely what we cannot do.

An ancestral proposition is supposed to refer to an event that took place *before* the very appearance of subjective temporality, thus before the existence of correlation as such. Confronted with the task of explaining this event, the correlationist will indeed find himself in deep waters. No matter how far into the past he is prepared to retreat from his present position, he will, by his very moving back, do nothing but extend his present, that is, phenomenal, subjective temporality; nowhere will he possibly come across anything belonging to the realm of the ancestral in-itself. The same holds true in the opposite direction: if he were to start from the ancestral event and proceed towards the future, at no point would he reach the moment where another, subjective, time could start, so that up to the present moment he would remain trapped within the same temporality as it is in itself. To this extent, the ancestral event is contradictory indeed, as it both denies and affirms the existence of correlation.

But if this is so, we have to ask ourselves: How do we know that the ancestral event *in this sense* is not merely an empty word?¹⁵ More precisely, how can we show to the correlationist that events of this kind are really possible, that they could actually have taken place? Once again, the problem stems from the fact that we can do it solely by integrating these events into the temporality that we are currently in; but by doing so, we prove to the correlationist that the event in question is, in fact, located within the phenomenal temporality—and, therefore, that the ancestral event is not ancestral after all. The result is that the reasons which make the correlationist unable to think the possibility of the ancestral event are also the reasons which make the realist unable to prove the reality of this possibility.

The problem of Meillassoux's argument is that the ancestral notion involves a transition from one temporality into the other, from the external in-itself into the phenomenal internality. The realist and the correlationist both agree that this kind of transition is impossible: there is but *one time*. Proceeding from this common ground, however, they reach opposite conclusions. The realist will claim that the correlationist is wrong in attributing a phenomenal character to the present; the correlationist will, in turn, insist that it is the realist who is wrong in assuming the existence of ancestral events or of temporality in itself. Both will reproach each other that the other's view is wrong because it implies a transition into the other temporality. But instead of refuting each other mutually, what manifests is that their argument is circular, presenting their presuppositions in the form of the conclusion.¹⁶ In the end, we are thus forced to admit that the ancestral event is unable to provide a concrete illustration of the inexistence of correlationism.

While in this respect the ancestral example proves to be unsuccessful, it can give us some valuable insight into the realist's implicit conception of correlationism. There are many clues to suggest that "Meillassoux's correlationist" remains devoted to the myth of presence, and that, at least implicitly, he still relates the authentic being to some *Urszene* of pure givenness in the form of a direct face-to-face between the subject and the object. It is only within such a framework that cognition can be considered certain on the mere basis of the subject's direct testimony, while in every other case it has to be additionally justified, usually by being related to some possible or actual immediate experience. Such a theory has many inherent problems. From the standpoint of actual presence, there is in principle no difference between remoteness in space and remoteness in time, since both are something not present here and now; from that standpoint, there is no real difference between the ancestral event, the remote past, and the moment just passed either, since they are all equally gone in the present moment.¹⁷ For this reason, in addition to the primacy of the present, Meillassoux's correlationist has to advocate a version of absolute time containing all real temporal moments and constituting, as the ultimate criterion of authenticity, the stock of possible truth. Only such a criterion would enable him to treat the not-present past differently from the not-present future and to introduce the duality required for the validity of the ancestral example within the not-present past. In short, it is only on the basis of such absolute temporality—with rather realist traits—that Meillassoux can talk of a certain "past that existed as a temporal succession in correlation to the transcendental subject even before we happen to descent back to it" and some other "past that was never present."

We cannot examine here to what extent a correlationism of this kind is still consistent. Suffice it to say that the idea of retrojection endangers the existence of meaning only for the philosophical systems falling under the description given above. And if the latter may, perhaps, apply to some varieties of phenomenology (which appear to be Meillassoux's target here), we find it profoundly alien to Kant. For with Kant, nothing in experience is immediate, everything is brought about by a presupposed act of constitution. The original scene of the pure givenness of appearances is in Kantian theory nothing but a retroactive reconstruction, as a list of necessary conditions that must have been met in order for experience to be materially possible. Moreover, this manifold cannot genuinely be called appearance, as it becomes one only by its subsumption under categories. Since the transition from the presumed point of pure givenness to phenomenal objectivity has always already taken place, it is equally not possible to speak of the transcendental subject in the sense of a being facing an object and guaranteeing its objectivity by its immediate testimony.

True, the very use of the term "appearance" implies that we have to accept the idea of a subject to whom the world appears. Yet this relation does not need to be a forcible one-to-one relation of the object-type entities. According to Berkley's *esse est percipi*, for instance, a thing would indeed cease to exist unless constantly supported by an actual presence of the perceiving subject. For Kant, however, the role of the subject is far less Stakhanovite: its intervention is in principle limited to the introductory gesture, which opens the very realm of appearing. But once a fragment of the phenomenal world has thus been established, no matter how small—and as already mentioned, it is established by the given manifold being subjected to lawful relations—with Kant, the

entire phenomenal world emancipates itself and starts to live its own life, in complete independence of any subject (this is precisely what “objective” means). The transcendental subject can now self-confidently take its leave, without having to worry that the things might fall into the abyss of nothingness: for it knows that the things are hereafter kept together by the universal laws of nature.

The fact that the existence of appearance is not grounded in the subject’s immediate and actual presence enables Kant to attenuate the ontological difference between the past and the present, between space and time, and even to abandon the notion of closeness altogether. If no experience is immediately given, then the transcendental subject is equidistant from every phenomenon integrated in the world. Kant has no problem whatsoever with speaking about the past that existed well before the emergence of the human species, since, due to the laws governing the phenomenal world, the past is equally close to him as the present.¹⁸ Moreover, by following the same pattern, Kant can provide a successful explanation for the present that is too distant in space to become the object of immediate observation (the case of “inhabitants of the moon”).¹⁹ This also applies to what is intimately close, but is for some reason or other not directly observable (the problem of the ultimate constitutive parts of composed substances on the one hand,²⁰ and the question of magnetic matter on the other).²¹ Using the same argument, we could easily add many other manifest features of what exists in the present, and even more so, what will exist in the future. To make these kinds of projections, one simply has to take into account the general Kantian constraint that the subject is essentially finite and therefore unable to cognize any single phenomenon in its complete determination.²²

Surprisingly enough, the structure of Meillassoux’s argument suggests that, in his argumentation, he himself is covertly prone to naive realism since he gives a pronounced privilege to the present.²³ But in the end, the decisive conclusion is, in general, that the ancestral example is by itself unable to make the inconsistency of correlationism evident, and, in particular, that it is of no avail against transcendental idealism.

2. While the ancestral example doubtlessly plays a role in Meillassoux’s project, it is by no means decisive. The key step in breaking the correlationist closure is performed independently of it and does not mention it at all.

The entire argument has, as already indicated, the structure of two correlationist offensives aimed at the de-absolutization of thought, followed by two attempts at its absolutization, the first being undertaken by so-called subjectivist metaphysics and the second by speculative realism itself. Every subsequent step is, as is appropriate for a historical perspective, justified in the Hegelian manner of “determinate negation”; that is, not simply by demonstrating the nullity of its immediate predecessor but by trying to establish its own position precisely on the assumption of the correctness of its predecessor. The next step in the argument accepts the soundness of what, in principle, constitutes the strength of the previous standpoint, adding, however, a small yet decisive comment: when the argument is fully developed, its consequences prove to be exactly the opposite of what was first claimed. This is particularly true of the speculative realist who wants to break the correlationist closure by turning the second correlationist

attack against itself. Because the correlationist evidently accepts the validity of the inference used to refute subjectivist metaphysics, so the argument goes, he also has to admit that he is actually able to think the in-itself—namely, as the absence of any reason. If, for that reason, he is justified in taking a step away from subjectivist metaphysics, then he is, for the very same reason, obliged to take one step further.

As in every argument of this type, the fundamental problem lies in the fact that its validity depends on the strength of the opponent. Paradoxically, and somehow schizophrenically, Meillassoux first has to argue that correlationism is right on the grounds presented in his reconstruction to be able to demonstrate its ultimate invalidity on that very basis further on. He has to affirm that subjectivist metaphysics can refute the original correlationism and that correlationism can refute subjectivist metaphysics; further, he has to claim that these refutations can be carried out in the way and on the grounds presented in his reconstruction; and, finally, he has to assert that these grounds are actually valid, not only for the correlationist but by themselves, without qualification. If but one step in the above chain of reasoning turns out to be defective, Meillassoux's entire argument breaks down.

Unfortunately, this is not the place to examine the entire sequence.²⁴ We will pay closer attention only to the crucial third step, since that is the point at which a correlationist is supposed to touch the absolute and by that, unknowingly and unwittingly, break the correlationist closure. In this regard, our claim is the very opposite of Meillassoux's. If we suppose that from the third step indeed follows the fourth, as argued by Meillassoux, then the assumed validity of the fourth step retroactively invalidates the third step, used by correlationism to refute subjectivist metaphysics. Or, alternatively, if Meillassoux indeed reads the correlationist's argument correctly, then this argument can have no validity for the correlationist. Therefore, instead of justifying the standpoint of speculative materialism, it in fact, unknowingly and unwittingly, finally succeeds in defending subjectivist metaphysics. Let us explain.

The paradigmatic correlationist statement asserts that what is unthinkable for us is not impossible in itself. Because we know we are finite, we cannot allow ourselves to limit things in themselves by our forms, and so we cannot exclude the possibility that something may happen, even if it is utterly impossible for us to conceive. As already noted, the correlationist does not pretend that this statement refers to something in itself. In his modesty, he insists he is speaking merely about his awareness of his limits, which is positive, but he does not dare to conclude that there actually is anything beyond these limits, let alone the in-itself.²⁵ The correlationist's modesty is misplaced, however, argues Meillassoux. By recognizing his limitedness, he actually manages to open a realm beyond our forms of thought, the realm of the in-itself; and although the correlationist has indeed no reason whatsoever to think of anything in it in a positive way, he thereby, as a matter of fact, does think something in it in a positive way—that is, insofar as the in-itself is indeed without any reason: “For even if I cannot think the unthinkable, I can think the possibility of the unthinkable by dint of the unreason of the real.”²⁶

Both moments of the above breakthrough can be shown to be invalid. If we take the correlationist stance seriously, as Meillassoux insists we should, then we know in advance that we cannot know anything about the a-subjective in-itself—with one

exception, namely, *that* we cannot know anything about it. For us, it is an empty and contradictory concept. Even when we think of something beyond the realm of our cognition, we still think it through our forms of thought, and if we decide to name this the “in-itself,” this is still the in-itself for us. At this point, the reminder of our finitude may lead us to think that the forms of our thought could be different from what they in fact are. Exactly how far their possible or thinkable changeability extends is hard to determine in advance; we can assume that throughout every change a certain core has to remain unchanged, so that it is finally still possible to speak of a gradual series of transformations, establishing a kind of continuity between the initial and the finale state. But in any case, we do know that this possible continuity has a *bottom limit*: since we constitutively think in subject form and from a certain subjective standpoint, finite forms of thought cannot be such to imply the non-existence of every subjective standpoint (and correlation along with it). This remains an unsurpassable obstacle, which no consequent correlationist will be prepared to overstep, no matter how eager he is to refute subjectivist metaphysics.

Meillassoux would perhaps even agree with the above assessment. For him, the correlationist closure is indeed impossible to penetrate in a direct attack. It is for that reason that he sets out to break it indirectly by thinking “the possibility of the unthinkable by dint of the unreason of the real.”²⁷ Yet, here, such meandering is to no avail. For if such a stratagem may well permit one to achieve a revolution within an already existing space, it can never open a space that did not exist before. We are thus bound to admit that this introduction of the principle of unreason is still thought in our forms of thought, designating only the unreason for us, not unreason in itself.

But as already noted, this is exactly what, according to Meillassoux, a correlationist cannot allow himself to say if he wants to successfully refute subjectivist metaphysics. He has to assume that he actually and effectively thought the absolute in itself, “since were this not the case, it would never had occurred to you not to be a subjective (or speculative) idealist.”²⁸ More precisely:

Let me make myself clear, for this is the crux of the matter. So long as you maintain that your scepticism towards all knowledge of the absolute is based upon an argument, rather than upon mere belief or opinion, then you have to grant that the core of any such argument must be *thinkable*. But the core of your argument is that we *can* access everything’s capacity-not-to-be, or capacity-to-be-other; our own as well as the world’s.²⁹

Let us then try to understand and, for the sake of the argument, let us suppose that the interpretation of the third step given above is correct. For if Meillassoux is really right in this respect, then we are simply forced to find out that, for the correlationist, the third step cannot be conclusive. The mere fact that the correlationist *erroneously accepts* this argument cannot provide a sufficient ground for Meillassoux’s triumph. It would be truly remarkable indeed if access to the absolute as it is in itself were ultimately conditioned by someone’s factual mistake.

In justifying true cognition, it does not suffice to have reasons; one has to have the right reasons. Descartes, too, started with reasons in favor of his affirmation that

everything can be doubted. But as he later touched upon those completely evident truths, which we are not even able to think about without inadvertently producing an unshakable certainty about their truth, he was forced to recognize that there indeed are things that are impossible to doubt. Descartes was consistent enough to acknowledge that his initial claim was—despite all the reasons—wrong. Meillassoux does not do this. His standpoint cannot pass for knowledge, even if *per impossibilem* we suppose it to be correct, since he is unable to show that he has the right reasons. We can see this if we now *per impossibilem* suppose that the world in itself, unknown to us, in fact obeys the most classical, pre-determined necessity: this fact would at no point disturb the speculative realist's argumentation.

In the end, the shortcomings of Meillassoux's argument could be aptly illustrated by using Kant's distinction between the logical and the real possibility. The standard requirement for the possibility of thought is the absence of contradiction—but for Kant, as we know, this is by far not enough for the possibility of a thing corresponding to that thought. In order to establish the real possibility, something more is needed: it is necessary to exhibit positive conditions for the possibility of the existence of the thing, ultimately, to show that the thing in question is possible in its complete determination.³⁰ Until this additional requirement is met, it can always turn out that our thought is possible simply because it is empty and has no sense and meaning (empty thoughts lack contradiction by virtue of their very emptiness). With regard to our case, we would have to show in a positive way not only how the thought of the reasonless in-itself is free of contradiction, but also how it is possible at all. Meillassoux does not provide anything of the sort. On the contrary, at the critical points where our ignorance is supposed to transform into an insight into the inner structure of things in themselves, and where one would expect the speculative realist to display the greatest possible certainty, Meillassoux often employs discursive attenuators (“on se demande si”) and incentive calls (“il nous faut comprendre,” “nous devons saisir”). Long gone are the times “when the empty possibility to represent something in a different way was sufficient to refute a view.”³¹

3. Meillassoux presents his argument as a succession of two parallel gestures of the absolutization of thought, following two equally parallel attempts of its relativization. This parallel duality is of crucial importance for his discursive strategy. Only thus can he claim that for a successful correlationist de-absolutization it does not suffice to insist on one but two characteristics of correlation; only thus can he provide a structural analogy between the first, provisional, and the second, final, break of the correlationist closure; and only thus can he show how something that is impossible when attempted directly can nonetheless be done by using a deviation. Throughout the entire argumentation, he relies on the following parallelism: Just as subjectivist metaphysics absolutized the very correlation that was initially used by correlationism to limit our access to the absolute, so speculative realism absolutizes that very facticity that was used by correlationism to relativize the first absolutization. This second absolutization, argues Meillassoux, is at the same time the final one. For, in the correlationist circle, there are no more than two constitutive elements: the fact of its existence and the determinacy of its forms. And besides, any further attempt at de-absolutization would

have to make affirmative use of the principle of unreason and would therefore only absolutize what it has set to de-absolutize.

The discursive structure of double duality is distinguished by its aesthetic elegance, a quality characteristic of all great conceptual achievements. Moreover, it has the advantage of allowing for further applications. One can legitimately ask, for instance, what the results would be if the argument were carried out in reverse, starting with the absolutization of facticity and following with the absolutization of the correlation. Be that as it may, we have to take into account that the use of the same argument on two different occasions requires that the conditions of its validity as well as the circumstances of its application remain, at least as regards their essentials, the same. With Meillassoux, this is hard to affirm.

The first gesture of absolutization of the correlation is in principle acceptable simply because we stay within the correlation throughout. The basic environment remains unaltered; the change affects only the implicit conception of the absolute, which turns from something essentially a-subjective into an absolute that already includes the subjective dimension. This is why, in this case, it is acceptable to use dialectic argumentation: here, our relation to the absolute is something that directly and trivially affects the absolute itself, and when our stance towards it changes, this is bound to make an impact on the absolute. In the second case, however, the previous conditions no longer apply. If we suppose that the correlationist closure indeed gets demolished, this produces a substantial transformation of the entire environment, which invalidates the analogy and prohibits further use of the previous argument—at least until it is substantially adapted. In the second attempt at absolutization, it is equally not possible to use a Hegelian type of argumentation, which consists in unveiling all the consequences of an affirmation. Since the absolute is now perceived as an a-subjective entity, quietly lying in its self-sufficiency at the end of the road, the absolute is completely indifferent to what a certain subject might think of it. To such an absolute, all the subtleties of dialectics are of no avail.³²

Drawing on remarks concerning the implicit conception of the absolute, we are now in a position to give a more accurate description of the structural crack in the argument presented above. We have already noted that Meillassoux is fighting two opponents at once: the correlationist affirming that we are always already contained within the subjective circle, and the relativist affirming that the absolute is out of our reach. It is often the case that both of these propositions happen to be advocated by the same philosophers. Yet we have to notice that they are, in principle, independent of one another. Someone who insists that we always already think from our subjective position cannot solely on this ground jump to the conclusion that, therefore, the absolute is unthinkable for us. In fact, this is a new presupposition, concerning the nature of the absolute. Such a presupposition can be made from different perspectives. If we suppose that the absolute is a kind of thing in itself located beyond our thought, what we get is “relativist correlationism”; but if we, on the contrary, assume that the thing in itself in the usual sense is an empty concept (since we ourselves are already within the absolute), then what emerges could be called “absolutist correlationism.”

Both alternatives are originally on equal footing. Meillassoux, however, arranges them into an ordered succession, and this makes his presentation biased from the very

beginning. He is later bound to struggle as he searches for an adequate definition of correlationism, since, as a consequence of his strategy, there is no proper place to be found for Hegel. And if Meillassoux's correlationist is immediately deprived of the absolute, then, as we have learned from Hegel, it is his conception of the absolute to blame, not the correlationist circle.³³

Meillassoux's project could be understood as an attempt to draw an inference from thought to being even after the demise of metaphysics. As an ontological argument for the new era, this argument is designed to justify not a necessary being, but rather the necessity of being without anything being necessary. But in order to make such an inference possible at all, it is necessary to presuppose a basic identity, a fundamental continuity holding the two orders together. As Schelling wrote: "The first presupposition of all knowing is that that which knows and that which is known is one and the same."³⁴ Meillassoux seems unwilling to accept this.

III

As speculative realism seems to remain an unfinished project that has been abandoned by its author way before its completion, it is bold to give a general assessment of it. Every attempt to that effect is bound to make inevitably premature assumptions, subjecting itself to reproaches about, for instance, simply missing the target.³⁵ This is a risk we will readily assume.

1. If we start by comparing the declared goals of speculative realism with what it did manage to achieve, we can note a series of inner incongruities or pragmatic contradictions.

The project was designed to defend common sense (and science) from philosophical subtleties that tend to turn the literal meaning upside down. But if we now look at what can be said about the world as it is conceived by speculative realism, we get a rather strange picture: in front of us is a world where punctual entities emerge and disappear without any order of their own; a world where in any moment and for no reason anything can happen; a world where, unless it contradicts the principle of mathematics, everything is possible, including the possibility that the natural laws may in the very next moment alter and that, for example, the sun will not rise in the morning. In short, we are confronted with a world (a "hyper-chaos") that could not be more alien to common sense (and science), but that is, for that matter, perfectly familiar to the most traditional of metaphysics, together with all its picturesque eccentricities. Where being naive in philosophy leads to!

In a similar vein, Meillassoux rejects the idea of retrojection on the ground that it would imply the existence of a past that was never present, destroying the very possibility of meaning. To object to retrojection is strange, however. In fact, a very similar procedure is used by science itself, such as in determining the age of organic matter based on the half-life of a carbon isotope, or in calculating the exact date of a solar eclipse that happened in the past. In the latter case, the eventual availability of written documents is certainly exciting, yet it does not significantly affect the results

obtained by simply rolling back the present state of the solar system in accordance with the laws of nature. What is more, if we now accept the results of Meillassoux's speculative realism, we are obliged to allow for the real possibility that common sense and science alike speak of a past that never existed. All the statements made by science about the past (or the future) are valid solely under the condition of *ceteris paribus*, that is, that the system of natural laws retains at least its basic stability. In speculative realism, however, this very presupposition is no longer certain. If the laws may indeed change, in any given moment and for no reason, then it is absolutely possible that they actually changed in the past. It is therefore perfectly possible that the entirety of science describes an imaginary past. And, to that extent, it is also possible that the configuration of the world as we know it today was in fact established around 6,000 years ago, exactly as insisted by those "picturesque believers" derided by Meillassoux.

The presented paradoxes suggest that, at a certain point, speculative materialism would be forced to reintroduce the common distinction between the in-itself and appearance. As we have seen, this distinction is possibly going to be built along the lines of either Locke's or Kant's model. Hyper-chaos would in this case refer primarily to the world of the in-itself, while the phenomenal world would display far more familiar traits and would fall under stable laws. But in this case, Meillassoux would have found himself in another pragmatic paradox. The project of speculative realism was originally introduced in the name of common sense and in support of the affirmation that science describes the world as it is in itself. Now, however, it would have turned out that, on the contrary, it speaks primarily of the world of appearance.

Another paradox relates to the fact that speculative materialism developed its project in order to curb the light-mindedness of contemporary philosophy, which, at least in part, bears responsibility for the perverse situation in which any fideistic claim can appear to be more rational than the requirements of rational explanation. In this sense, Meillassoux's goal is definitely to fight for the cause of reason. But if he finds himself defending the principle of unreason within this process, the cure may just be worse than the disease. What is left of the idea of rational explanation if we accept that there is no reason for why things are the way they are? If indeed everything is possible, any proposition regarding the future is *a priori* on equal footing, which widely opens the door to every kind of *Schwärmerei* and empty fiction.³⁶

At this point, Meillassoux protests that *irraison* is not *déraison*. To abandon the principle of reason does not imply giving up rationality as such; for him, it rather stands for the call to develop a different kind of rationality. But the problem is that this "logique de l'irraison" is far from being developed, and for now, there is no guarantee that it is even possible to develop it. In this respect, the use of mathematics is more an attempt to shift the problem to a subcontractor, a great expert in his field, rather than a promising strategy.³⁷ And here we are tempted to ask, together with Lessing, whether it is really wise to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

2. Another group of questions concerning the project as a whole pertains to its implicit ontology. The field of the undefined here is even larger than usual, and the risk of false assumptions even greater. Nevertheless, we believe that Harman was basically right in referring to speculative realism as hyper-occasionalism.³⁸

The term occasionalism is used to designate a particular system which explains how the extended and the thinking substance can affect one another without having common attributes. However, this kind of interaction is but a special case of the more general question of how a substance can produce a change in the state of another substance at all if the substance is something that essentially exists independently. Universalized occasionalism is consequently a system in which substances are completely isolated from one another, having no real interaction. If correspondence does occur, it is typically produced by the intervention of a benevolent God, who, at the occasion of change in one substance, spontaneously produces a corresponding change in some other substance. As a result, an outward impression that one substance is the cause of the effect in the other is created.³⁹

In a sense, Meillassoux proposes a radicalized version of such a system. If in general occasionalism God is constantly kept busy by ordering appearances along the principle of reason, in Meillassoux, he can now take his leave. For, a change in the state of one substance is no reason why any change should be produced in some other substance—there is no relation among them now, be it real or ideal. But what is even more important, in Meillassoux, the substance has lost every relation *to itself* as well. A change in its state is henceforth not a reason for why anything else should happen within it: the substance's state in one moment in no way affects its state in the following moment. In this way, however, the substance eventually loses what used to constitute its very virtue—the capacity to preserve its identity. It turns into an essentially momentous, punctual entity, which is what it is, comes to be when it does, and is while it is, without any reason. Such hyper-occasionalism might suitably be described as Hume inverted, where the role of ideas has been filled by “things” themselves.⁴⁰

It goes without saying that such ontology has an extremely heavy argumentative burden to sustain. If, in the final analysis, the absolute consists of entities which originally exist for a moment only, without constitutive duration, and which by themselves do not entertain any relations to other entities of the same order or to themselves in the next moment, then it indeed becomes difficult to show not only how a phenomenal world featuring familiar traits can arise out of this, but also how the predicate of being could be attributed to something like this at all. Is this still something rather than nothing? How can it acquire any positive qualities? What might be its conditions of identity? Can it be said to have any identity at all? In spite of Meillassoux's repeated insistence on how in any moment anything can change into something else, it could well be that he is actually not able to think the concept of change or alteration at all, since alteration presupposes the identity of what is being altered.⁴¹ For that reason, the above conception of being cannot represent an original state.⁴² If the world indeed consisted of such relationless entities, its objects would be left devoid of qualities. In order to achieve minimal consistency, they would have to be additionally furnished with some kind of eternal essences and supported by some higher being. Hyper-occasionalist ontology would thus turn out to be profoundly metaphysical in the most traditional sense.

We claimed that in a hyper-occasionalist world God becomes idle, not that he simply disappears. Due to the punctual nature of basic entities, Meillassoux is bound to face difficulties when it comes to providing a proper foundation for space,⁴³ and particularly

for time. He seems to be obligated to assume the existence of some absolute time that is independent of anything in it on the one hand, while it provides the ultimate verification of any present actuality on the other. Only such divine time can enable Meillassoux to draw a demarcation line between the past that was once present and the one that never existed as the present. It goes without saying that such a conception of time has serious metaphysical consequences as well.

3. The examinations conducted so far suggest that Meillassoux endorses basic presuppositions of pre-critical ontology, where the absolute is still conceived according to the model of a thing and truth is defined as an external correspondence between the atom of thought and the atom of the object. In short, it seems that Meillassoux still relies on the regime of rationality that Hegel called *Vorstellung*. It is in reference to this conception that Lessing once commented that, for it, truth is like a coin to be taken ready-made out of the pocket.

Meillassoux is well aware that such a monetary conception of thinking and being is obliged to accept various assumptions that have nowadays lost their former self-evidence. Indeed, this is why he wants to develop a different, speculative philosophy, which, for instance, forsakes the principle of reason. He is equally familiar with the propositions that were developed as possible alternatives to representational thought by authors such as Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. Therefore, if he does not accept them, this is simply because he finds them inconclusive. This is particularly the case with Hegel. Meillassoux seems unwilling to forgive that in his attempt to reach the absolute, Hegel has renounced the principle of contradiction. But if it is possible not to agree with the proposed solutions, it is impossible to ignore that the problems they respond to—problems, paradigmatically exposed by the so-called Spinozism controversy, ranging from the proper conception of subjectivity to the status of reason and truth—are real. The failure to show an adequate understanding of these problems is in our view one of the main reasons for the ultimate failure of Meillassoux's project.

This nearly "voluntary," self-imposed sightlessness is well discernible in the strategy developed by Meillassoux to refute one of the "parades" made from the standpoint of transcendental idealism. In an addition written specially for the English edition of *After Finitude*, Meillassoux flawlessly recapitulates the objection according to which "a transcendental condition is not an object."⁴⁴ He then begins his counter-argument by introducing what appears to be, again, a very correct distinction between the subjective and the objective mode of being. However, in developing his argument further, he simply seems to forget this crucial distinction. What are, he asks, "the conditions under which there is a transcendental subject"?⁴⁵ And in spite of knowing only too well that the transcendental subject is in its very concept the unconditioned, he still treats its being as conditioned in the most outward manner possible. Making the transcendental subject dependent on the pre-existing conditions of its "incarnation," he concludes by explicitly reducing it to something that exists in the manner of things (that is, "takes place" at a determinate point in space and time), thereby simply evading the fundamental question of the subject's mode of existence.⁴⁶

A similar sightlessness, in the sense of a specific configuration of the visible and the invisible, can be observed in relation to the question of the necessity of the correlation.

Meillassoux begins by highlighting the position of subjectivist metaphysics according to which the correlation is necessary in the sense that we cannot think but within it. This conceptual necessity, which is unconditional in exactly the same sense as the subject, is then interpreted by Meillassoux in the sense of the necessity of a thing; and since there is no external condition that could possibly determine it, he comes to the conclusion that the existence of the correlation is not necessary. As if the inner necessity could be thought from the standpoint of its outer conditions! As if the subject of thought could have accompanied the transition that made it into a subject! As if Fichte's I were something else beyond its self-positing! At this point, it becomes manifest that Meillassoux is not prepared to accept any other necessity than the necessity of the substantial type, understood as a relation between two objects, and that he is therefore unable to see how Hegel, for instance, tries to develop a different kind of necessity, one that would arise out of facticity as a sort of accidental absolute lacking any outer ground, but not being any less absolute because of it. In this respect, Meillassoux's fight against correlationism actually bears a striking resemblance to the struggle of the Enlightenment against superstition as portrayed by Hegel.

As we have seen, in a decisive moment and against his implicit assumptions, Meillassoux in fact argues in a Hegelian manner—to that extent, he is half-Hegelian. Perhaps he would have become completely Hegelian had he realized that Hegel was trying to develop a new mode of conceptuality and that, for this very reason, his system was called speculative idealism, not subjectivist metaphysics. If this were the case, he would have probably also noticed that when confronted with Jacobi's anti-philosophical objections on the one side and romantic endeavors to bypass them on the other, Hegel had a similar goal as himself in his struggle against what is the *Schwärmerei* of our times.

IV

In a rather short period of time since the publication of his book, Meillassoux managed to attract enormous theoretical interest. By virtue of his inventiveness, his courage of thought, his search for clarity, and finally the greatest possible goals he has set for himself, there is no doubt that the attention was warranted. However, the gaps in his project, and some of them are rather serious, suggest that the admired response cannot be solely due to the inner strength of his argument. To conclude, let us therefore take a brief look at what the events surrounding the publication of the book could tell us about the state of contemporary philosophy, French philosophy in particular.

The reasons for the popularity of a certain philosophical program are, even within philosophical circles, often related to factors external to philosophy proper. A discipline called "the political economy of theoretical production" would probably lead to the conclusion that the public success of certain philosophemes depends on a vast array of factors, ranging from institutional infrastructure to market demands, which may eventually affect the very content of philosophical thinking. It could also be established that the chances of success significantly increase when the thought has strong connections to some social group or when it occupies a place that is, as it is said, waiting

for it in the spirit of the times. This is nothing new. Even in Fichte's case his vertiginous ascension to prominence was, probably more than for philosophical reasons, related to the political revolution in France and the early fermentation of Romanticism in Germany.

In the case of Meillassoux, his extraordinarily positive reception undoubtedly resonates with a certain discontent, with feelings of weariness and fatigue, which have obviously spread within contemporary philosophy. The call for the absolute, which, as a matter of fact, exploits the means of old metaphysics and in many aspects acts in direct opposition to dominant philosophical views, would not be heard, at least not to such an extent, had the idol not already been close to falling. In this sense, the general enthusiasm triggered by Meillassoux indeed had a prognostic power.

Another important circumstance of the public response to Meillassoux refers, in our view, to the fact that he explicitly stood up for naivety in philosophy. This is probably the reason why he was given such a warm reception precisely in those philosophical circles that used to be renowned for their subtle games of incessant cross-referring. Had he come out within the analytical theory of meaning or reference, for instance, he would have easily been dismissed with a simple wave of the hand as yet another one of those common sense metaphysicians, who, like Putnam,⁴⁷ still bother to prove that the world exists. But because Meillassoux is one of us, and because we are oh-so-subtle, his naivety can be (another turn of the screw) understood as the ultimate level of subtlety. We may not agree completely with the author, yet his argument is without a doubt refreshing and worthy of the closest reading, and besides, we can now associate with common sense while, if we want to, at the same time flirting with metaphysics.

This, however, is precisely the kind of reception that would not have been possible had Meillassoux really been taken seriously. We must therefore stress that naivety has two dimensions. It can present itself in the form of the favorable acceptance of the views of common sense, so that the first task of philosophy becomes to give them proper justification in their literal meaning. The other, and rather different, use of naivety in philosophy requires, on the contrary, that we are able to treat every single thought as a bastard, that we are prepared to start anywhere and without presuppositions, relying on nothing but the strength and necessity of thought. To be naive in philosophy in this sense means that no question seems too banal not to be worth tarrying with and no answer so evident that it cannot be questioned. To be naive means simply to refrain from logical geniality and to acknowledge nothing but the binding force of understanding as the right path to the science of thinking, which is equally available for all. Finally, to be naive in philosophy means having the courage to take up thought. This courage was demonstrated by Meillassoux—and in this we support his naivety.

One final remark. Meillassoux's project, as we have seen, grew out of dissatisfaction with the postmodernist strain of thought that lost all connection to both common sense and science while making it impossible to conceive any viable emancipatory program. As it was Kant who was designated the ultimate culprit for the deplorable state philosophy is presently in, it comes as no surprise that Meillassoux, as it were, performed a pre-critical turn. This is not to say that in the process of justification of his

speculative realism he did not deploy, very skillfully, some decisive arguments that clearly come from the post-Kantian tradition. Our point is rather that his argumentation, the very form of the concepts he uses, pertain to a pre-critical conceptual regime that Hegel once called *Vorstellung*. Indeed, not only are thoughts treated as if they were mental atoms, the very picture of the world produced in the end bears an unmistakable resemblance to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophical systems—together with all their eccentricities of, for instance, worlds disappearing behind our backs, objects just popping up, etc.

But as we have equally seen, everything suggests that Meillassoux's project of speculative realism is going to remain unfinished. In this conjunction, the realist banner has been taken up by authors such as Graham Harman, Markus Gabriel, Maurizio Ferraris, and others, each defending their own variety of this new realism. However, while these authors largely share the basic anti-postmodern thrust—both theoretically, as regards the need to reconnect to the sciences, and politically, as a request to formulate a feasible emancipatory strategy⁴⁸—we must not overlook that there is a profound difference separating them from Meillassoux. For if Meillassoux defends the most rigorous form of argumentation, taking its criteria from mathematics, the new realists tend to satisfy themselves with what is more or less convincing, natural, witty, or well-formulated. In one of his latest books, Maurizio Ferraris, for example, proposes a version of naturalistic epistemology, suggesting that it makes no sense to engage in a hair-splitting inquiry on how it is possible for us to know things when it is obvious that, as time goes by, more or less everything happens to occur and more or less everything happens to be known. "Sooner or later, the truth comes out," as indeed the proverb says. In this sense, observes Ferraris, "perfect epistemology is therefore history," adding that, "if awarded with an eternal life," one would be in a position to "realize historic knowledge as absolute knowing regarding the past."⁴⁹ This is undoubtedly nicely put. However, although this kind of argument may be perfectly useful for everyday life, and even successful in movies such as *Groundhog Day*,⁵⁰ in the field of philosophy, it brings us no closer to answering the question of how we can know anything at all. From this perspective, new realism constitutes yet another return to the pre-critical, this time to the so-called *Popularphilosophie*, which flourished in Germany in the second half of the eighteenth century. Again, this is not an argument against popular philosophy as such, then or now, for it definitely has its merits. It is only that, insofar as it takes the place of philosophy, it gives up what constitutes its proper task.

Interestingly enough, in order to exit the postmodern entrapment, both Meillassoux and the new realists in a sense returned to the pre-critical. But given that the situation in question is very much like the early Romanticist one, with its exaltation of feeling or art against the limitations of rational knowledge, it seems at hand that instead of returning to the pre-critical, one should rather repeat Hegel's gesture. This is especially so since what can be seen as the main premises of Meillassoux's project—the correlationist, the ancestral, and the speculative thesis—can all be shown to be defective: the first arbitrarily assumes that thought and the absolute are external to each other (Hegel); the second fails to allow for the distinction between logical and real possibility (Kant); the third disregards the capacity of subjective concepts to think a non-

metaphysical necessity (Fichte, Hegel). Consequently, it might be more realistic, and more promising, to propose a speculative version of absolute idealism instead.

Notes

- 1 The research included in this chapter was funded by the Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS) under the research project "Language and Science: the Possibility of Realism in Modern Philosophy" (J6-7364).
- 2 I would like to thank Žana Stefanović for the incitement and valuable suggestions. In addition, I would like to thank Bojana Jovičević, Sabina Žakelj, and Tanja Dominko for the English.
- 3 Here, one can finally find a kind of continuity between Meillassoux's project and some aspects of French theory. Structuralism, too, explicitly relied on the most recent insights of linguistics. On this basis, it even set out to develop a general theory of knowledge that would include both the science of nature and the science of man (see Jean-Claude Milner, *Le périple structural: figures et paradigme* [Paris: Seuil, 2002]). In spite of all the divergences that profoundly separate Meillassoux from the main figures of French Thought, in this regard he does retain a clear proximity to Lacan and Badiou, who equally, although each in his own way, mathematized ontology. It may be noted that Meillassoux's implicit understanding of science appears to be rather narrow, shaped after the ideal of physics, and is as such likely to exclude the science of man and large portions of the science of nature.
- 4 Cf. Quentin Meillassoux, "Métaphysique, speculation, correlation," in *Ce peu d'espace autour: six essais sur la métaphysique et ses limites*, ed. Bernard Mabilie (Chatou: La Transparence, 2010), 83.
- 5 Later on, Meillassoux increasingly used the name of speculative materialism, intended to convey that the absolute is independent of thought. We will use both expressions interchangeably.
- 6 This reading is assumed throughout the entire chapter. It is certainly possible that Meillassoux understood the absolutization of the correlation in such a manner that the subject of correlation was itself an absolute being that, as such, was somehow capable of grasping the things in themselves. That would justify the conclusion that the impossibility of the ontological proof makes it unattainable to ground the necessity of such a subject. This interpretation will, however, not be taken into account, since it is not worth a closer examination.
- 7 In this respect, Meillassoux's philosophical procedure is comparable to Descartes's treatise on the creation of eternal truths; there is a structural similarity between Descartes's argumentation and Meillassoux's breaking of the correlationist closure that one can hardly call a coincidence.
- 8 Meillassoux, "Métaphysique, speculation, correlation," 75–6.
- 9 Ibid., 76. Meillassoux makes further comments that consequential correlationist philosophy would be the one to not only declare that we cannot say anything, by means of concept alone, but also refuse every absolutization *of the correlation itself*.
- 10 The question of nomenclature is a rather delicate one for Meillassoux. Since, in his argumentation, he relies heavily on typified philosophical positions, he is, on the one hand, compelled to use rather rough categories, which are necessarily insensitive to the finer details. It seems, for instance, that he uses thinking and cognition (or, the in-itself and the absolute) synonymously, to denote something like "successful access to . . ."

although, in a way, Kant built his entire philosophical system precisely on this differentiation. On the other hand, the characterization of these philosophical positions has to be very concise in order to include all the relevant positions that actually appeared in the history of post-Kantian philosophy. The fact that he uses his categories both as descriptive and normative at the same time does not contribute to the conclusiveness of his argument.

- 11 Let us mention but two major issues. Meillassoux assumes that, with Kant, the ontological proof was rejected on the grounds that being was not a predicate. According to our view, on the contrary, for Kant, the ultimate reason for its failure lies in the fact that no conceptual connection can be established between the necessary being and the most perfect being, leaving the concept of necessary being empty. Meillassoux further claims that in Transcendental Deduction, Kant based his argument on the apparent stability of natural laws: were appearance not subject to necessary laws, the world would have often changed its course, and since this is obviously not the case, appearance is indeed subjected to the categories and their lawfulness. Although this argument proves to be invalid, Meillassoux actually stands in defense of Kant, adding that he did not have the necessary conceptual tools at his disposal—at the time, Cantor had not yet discovered the transfinite calculus—and was therefore unable to see the shortcomings of his proof. In this decisive point, our disagreement with Meillassoux is triple. In our view, the Transcendental Deduction, far from pretending to justify the apparent stability of the world, wants rather to provide a rational foundation for the very possibility that there can be any kind of immanent relation between phenomenal objects, ultimately for the very possibility of the existence of something similar to a phenomenal object; in this sense, the fact of the existence of a unified representation of an object is by itself sufficient proof of the application of the categories. Similarly, we do not believe that Kant would have had to wait for Cantor in order to understand the inconclusiveness of Meillassoux's reading of his argument: all that was needed was already at his disposal in his conception of "infinite judgments." And contrary to Meillassoux, we hold that Kant's argument in the Transcendental Deduction is perfectly valid.
- 12 It is obvious, as Meillassoux seems to acknowledge himself in his later presentations, that his original derivation of the principle of contradiction cannot justify the impossibility of a contradictory being but only the impossibility of a *universally* contradictory being, as *ens sibi contradictissimum*. Only for a being that includes the predicate itself as well as its opposite for *all* the predicates is there no otherness to change into. It is a long way to go from here to the exclusion of every partial contradiction.
- 13 Meillassoux admits something similar. Cf. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 76: "Philosophy is invention of strange forms of argumentation, necessarily bordering on sophistry, which remains its dark structural double." Concerning the sense and meaning attributed by everyday consciousness and science to each other, Hegel makes a similar comment—cf. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 17: "For the natural consciousness to entrust itself immediately to science would be to make an attempt, induced by it knows not what, to walk upside down all of a sudden."
- 14 Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), hereinafter cited as *KrV* according to the pagination of original German editions. *KrV*, B148–9: "But this further extension

of concepts beyond *our* sensible intuition does not get us anywhere. For they are then merely empty concepts of objects, through which we cannot even judge whether the latter are possible or not—mere forms of thought without objective reality—since we have available no intuition to which the synthetic unity of apperception, which they alone contain, could be applied, and that could thus determine an object. *Our* sensible and empirical intuition alone can provide them with sense and significance.”

- 15 If ancestral propositions are understood solely as judgments referring to the time before the emergence of intelligent life, their meaningfulness and truth are undisputed. However, this is not what Meillassoux is after. These propositions acquire their intended ancestral dimension only when combined with the additional affirmation that the correlationist cannot speak of the existence of the objective world without the *simultaneous* existence of intelligent life.
- 16 In this respect, there is an evident analogy to the famous Leibniz–Clarke dispute and to Kant’s presentation of antinomy. The difference being that our “antinomy” undermines the soundness of the ancestral example.
- 17 Let us put a naive question. Suppose it turned out that there is no substantial difference between travelling through space and travelling through time. It is irrelevant whether such a journey is actually viable or not, since, similarly to Meillassoux, we are tackling the realm of possible sense, and we by no means want to limit science in advance. The question for Meillassoux is: If, and under what conditions, would the ancestral example still function?
- 18 Cf. Kant, *KrV*, B523/A495: “Thus one can say: The real things of past time are given in the transcendental object of experience, but for me they are objects and real in past time only insofar as I represent to myself that, in accordance with empirical laws, or in other words, the course of the world, a regressive series of possible perceptions (whether under the guidance of history or in the footsteps of causes and effects) leads to a time-series that has elapsed as the condition of the present time, which is then represented as real only in connection with a possible experience and not in itself; so that all those events which have elapsed from an inconceivable past time prior to my own existence signify nothing but the possibility of prolonging the chain of experience, starting with the present perception, upward to the conditions that determine it in time.” Interestingly enough, Meillassoux often quotes this very reference.
- 19 Cf. *ibid.*, B521/A492–3: “That there could be inhabitants of the moon, even though no human being has ever perceived them, must of course be admitted; but this means only that in the possible progress of experience we could encounter them; for everything is actual that stands in one context with a perception in accordance with the laws of the empirical progression.”
- 20 Cf. *ibid.*, B553/A505: “Hence I will have to say: the multiplicity of parts in a given appearance is in itself neither finite nor infinite, because appearance is nothing existing in itself, and the parts are given for the very first time through the regress of the decomposing synthesis, and in this regress, which is never given absolutely wholly either as finite nor as infinite.”
- 21 Cf. *ibid.*, B273/A226: “However, one can also cognize the existence of the thing prior to the perception of it, and therefore cognize it comparatively a priori, if only it is connected with some perceptions in accordance with the principles of their empirical connection (the analogies). For in that case the existence of the thing is still connected with our perceptions in a possible experience, and with the guidance of the analogies we can get from our actual perceptions to the thing in the series of possible

- perceptions. Thus we cognize the existence of a magnetic matter penetrating all bodies from the perception of attracted iron filings, although an immediate perception of this matter is impossible for us given the constitution of our organs.”
- 22 Kant's conception of the subjectivity of cognition is characterized by this conjunction of a *self-supporting world*, where the function of authentication is taken over by objective laws, and the *subject's finitude*, which makes complete cognition impossible and the notion of closeness inapplicable. In this way, Kant is able to affirm that the subject is *finite* without having to occupy a *determined point* of space and time. A similar point was recently made by Sebastian Rödl in his study on Kant's theoretical philosophy; see, for instance, *Categories of the Temporal*, trans. Sibylle Salewski (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), 73–4: “I have to be able to think the same thought at a different time. And this I can do if I can think it *by means of this other time*. There is necessarily a time at which I think it, but no time at which I necessarily think it. The thoughts expressed with situational sentences break free from the given time.”
 - 23 Similar observations were made by some commentators close to Meillassoux as well; cf. Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2007), 59.
 - 24 It is not clear, for instance, how exactly Meillassoux understands the *necessity* of correlation, which is supposed to characterize the standpoint of subjectivist metaphysics. Does it refer to the impossibility of its inexistence or to the impossibility of its being different? Further, it is not clear how exactly we are supposed to understand the grounds of this necessity, that is, what are the requirements for their validity.
 - 25 In this respect, Meillassoux relies on Kant's use of the concept of noumenon in the negative sense, as a boundary concept; cf. Kant, *KrV*, B310–11/A256: “The concept of a noumenon is therefore merely a *boundary concept*, in order to limit the pretension of sensibility, and therefore only of negative use.” In Kant, of course, this implies that it is forbidden to use the concept of noumenon in a positive sense, as a concept of an existing thing, and, in general, that for us no proposition referring to things in themselves can ever attain the distinctive status of cognition. However, the real question is what status to ascribe to statements such as the following (ibid., Bxxvi–xxvii): “Yet the reservation must also be well noted, that even if we cannot *cognize* these same objects as things in themselves, we at least must be able to *think* them as things in themselves. For otherwise there would follow the absurd proposition that there is an appearance without anything that appears.” Meillassoux basically wants to justify this proposition.
 - 26 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 56.
 - 27 Ibid.
 - 28 Ibid., 59.
 - 29 Ibid., 58.
 - 30 Cf. Kant, *KrV*, Bxxvi, n.
 - 31 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 11.
 - 32 For a convincing demonstration showing that Meillassoux's mode of argumentation effectively (and inadmissibly) bears all the hallmarks of the dialectical method, see Aljoša Kravanja, “Po končnosti in dialektika,” *Problemi* 48, no. 4/5 (2010): 139–60.
 - 33 How access to knowledge can be spoiled by the apparent thoroughness itself, is well described by Hegel; see Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 50: “In fact, this [apparent thoroughness masking itself as] fear presupposes something, and in fact presupposes

a great deal, as the truth, and it bases its scruples and its conclusions on what itself ought to be tested in advance as to whether or not it is the truth. This fear presupposes *representations* of cognizing as an *instrument* and as a *medium*, and it also presupposes a *difference between our own selves and this cognition*; but above all it presupposes that the absolute stands *on one side* and that *cognition stands on the other* for itself, and separated from the absolute, thought cognition is nevertheless something real; that is, it presupposes that cognition, which, by being outside of the absolute, is indeed also outside of the truth, is nevertheless truthful; an assumption through which that which calls itself the fear of error gives itself away to be known rather as the fear of the truth.”

- 34 F. W. J. Schelling, *System der gesamten Philosophie*, in *Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart: Cotta 1856–61), I/6, 137.
- 35 In his book review, Peter Hallward commented that “Meillassoux’s acausal ontology, in other words, includes no account of an actual process of transformation or development. . . . His insistence that anything might happen can only amount to an insistence on the bare possibility of radical change” (Peter Hallward, “Anything is possible,” *Radical Philosophy*, no. 152 [2008]: 51–7). After making this statement, Hallward was harshly criticized for trying “to extend the book’s arguments beyond the proper domain of their application and then to hold Meillassoux accountable for the resulting difficulties of the argument” (Nathan Brown, “The Speculative and the Specific: On Hallward and Meillassoux,” in Bryant et al., *The Speculative Turn* [Melbourne: re.press, 2011], 146.) This may well be a correct observation. But it is equally true that Meillassoux’s project must have certain consequences, and if he has not managed to make them explicit, this is still a sign of weakness, not strength.
- 36 To illustrate the problem, we can refer to Meillassoux’s comment (see Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 33) that such a refusal of the real necessity furnishes the minimal condition of every critique of ideology, insofar as it always strives to show how the present state of affairs is not necessary. We would affirm the very opposite. The first step in every possible critique of ideology should consist in the attempt to relate the dominant ideology back to the structural constraints of the existing social order, and in this sense, precisely, to demonstrate its necessity. Only once this preliminary step has been made, can the other one follow, consisting in the attempt to change the very conditions that produced the state in question and its concomitant ideology. This is what makes all the difference between scientific and utopian socialism!
- 37 Meillassoux puts high hopes in mathematics. This is curious enough: from an advocate of the absolute in itself it is unlikely to expect that he would derive knowledge of the world from a science *a priori*. Moreover, mathematics seems to have an additional discursive function in Meillassoux, the function of the “de-subjectivization of sense” and the “de-pathetization of philosophy,” as analyzed in Badiou by Simoniti; see Jure Simoniti, “Matematizacija biti in patos dogodka,” *Filozofski vestnik* 31, no. 3 (2010): 31–44.
- 38 See Graham Harman, “Quentin Meillassoux: A New French Philosopher,” *Philosophy Today*, 51, no. 1 (2007): 115.
- 39 For a detailed examination of the problem of causality in German philosophy of the eighteenth century, see Eric Watkins, *Kant and the Metaphysics of Causality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- 40 Cf. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 253: “The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, repass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations.”

- 41 This was justly emphasized by Kant; see *KrV*, B230/A187: “Now on this persistence there is also grounded a correction of the concept of *alteration*. Arising and perishing are not *alterations* of that which arises or perishes. *Alteration* is a way of existing that succeeds another way of existing of the very same object. Hence everything that is altered is lasting, and only its *state switches*.”
- 42 Meillassoux’s conception of being comes rather close to the view of Roquentin, the leading character in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea*, for whom objects slip out of their natural web of relations, revealing themselves in their bare being. There is an important difference between the two, however. Whereas in Sartre the de-connection of objects evidently takes place as a retreat from the objective world, as already constituted, in Meillassoux it is supposed to describe the original state of the world. In this respect, oddly enough, Sartre’s Roquentin seems more convincing than Meillassoux Quentin.
- 43 To extend the analogy with Hume, the problem with the space of hyper-chaotic objects seems to be similar to the question formulated by Hume in relation to the nature of mind; see Hume, *A Treatise*, 253.
- 44 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 24.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 For a similar point, see, again, Rödl, *The Categories of the Temporal*, 74–5. Both the concept of the subject in general and the transcendental subject in particular are notoriously ridden with paradoxes, grounded in the subject’s self-relating structure and non-fixed mode of being. Indeed, from the standpoint of traditional metaphysics, the conception of the subject is utterly unacceptable since it infringes on its most fundamental postulates of rationality. Nevertheless, we are obliged to accept it due to the necessity of traditional conceptuality itself, since it is only by accepting it that we can solve the contradictions that are both unavoidable and unsolvable within its premises. Meillassoux’s reluctance to accept the concept of the subject might be inspired, at least partially, by his apprehension that the concept of the subject would undermine the certainty of scientific propositions. However, this kind of fear is redundant. It is our good fortune that Hegel already introduced the distinction between *Wahrheit* and *Richtigkeit*, providing a sufficiently safe zone for science in its difference to philosophy, thus suggesting a possible solution to the problem Meillassoux raised through the notion of the ancestral. For a succinct presentation of the argument, see Jure Simoniti, *The Untruth of Reality: The Unacknowledged Realism of Modern Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 38–43.
- 47 Putnam designed an argument in favor of access to the in-itself that, in spite of its eccentricity—we are supposed to imagine that we are not humans made of flesh and bones, living in the middle of the world as we know it, but effectively brains in a vat that have the same sensory input as real humans and that therefore wrongly think they are real humans living in the real world—is in fact similar to Meillassoux’s. Cf. Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 15.
- 48 See, for instance, Ferraris’s acerbic remarks on the alleged political radicalism of postmodern thinkers: “Given that to really be Marxist involves too many renouncements on the personal and practical level . . . , the intellectuals decided to be Nietzscheans or Heideggerians, claiming that in these figures of thought, which are perfectly compatible with a bourgeois form of life, a way of revolution transpires which is much more profound and radical than that of Marx.” (Maurizio Ferraris, *Emergenza* [Torino: Einaudi, 2016], 82.)

49 Ferraris, *Emergenza*, XIII.

50 *Groundhog Day* (1993), [Film] Dir. Harold Ramis, USA: Columbia Pictures. The movie is about Phil (Bill Murray), who, for some reason, is trapped in time, living through the same day over and over again (keeping track of his previous episodes). At a certain point, he tells his colleague Rita (Andie MacDowell) about it, who, of course, always lives this day for the first time and finds the story crazy. He tries to convince her by showing her that he knows everything about every person present in the bar. Rita first accuses him of playing God, and then, bewildered, asks: "This is some kind of a trick?" To this, Phil replies: "Maybe the real God uses tricks. Maybe he's not omniscient. Maybe he's just been around for so long he knows everything."