

The Enigma of Realism: On Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*¹

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1. THE ARCHE-FOSSIL

Quentin Meillassoux has recently proposed a compelling diagnosis of what is most problematic in post-Kantian philosophy's relationship to the natural sciences.² The former founders on the enigma of the 'arche-fossil'. A fossil is a material bearing the traces of pre-historic life, but an 'arche-fossil' is a material indicating traces of 'ancestral' phenomena anterior even to the emergence of life. It provides the material basis for experiments yielding estimates of ancestral phenomena – such as, for instance, the radioactive isotope whose rate of decay provides an index of the age of rock samples, or the starlight whose luminescence provides an index of the age of distant stars. Natural science produces ancestral statements, such as, for example, that the universe is roughly 13.7 billion years old, that the earth formed roughly 4.5 billion years ago, that life

1. This is a heavily edited version of a chapter from the author's *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2007).

2. *Après la Finitude: Essai sur la nécessité de la contingence* (Paris: Seuil, 2006). English translation *After Finitude* (trans. R. Brassier) (London: Continuum, forthcoming 2008).

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developed on earth approximately 3.5 billion years ago, and that the earliest ancestors of the genus *Homo* emerged about 2 million years ago.³ Yet it is also generating an ever increasing number of 'descendent' statements, such as that the Milky Way will collide with the Andromeda galaxy in 3 billion years, or that the earth will be incinerated by the sun 4 billions years hence, or that all the stars in the universe will stop shining in 100 trillion years, or that eventually, one trillion, trillion, trillion years from now, all matter in the cosmos will disintegrate into unbound elementary particles. Philosophers should be more astonished by such statements than they seem to be, for they present a serious problem for post-Kantian philosophy. Yet strangely, the latter seems to remain entirely oblivious to it. The claim that these statements are philosophically enigmatic has nothing to do with qualms about the methods of measurement involved, or with issues of empirical accuracy, or any other misgivings about scientific methodology. They are enigmatic because of the startling philosophical implications harboured by their literal meaning. For the latter seems to point to something which violates the basic conditions of conceptual intelligibility stipulated by post-Kantian philosophy. In order to understand why this is so, we need to try to sketch the latter.

For all their various differences, post-Kantian philosophers can be said to share one fundamental conviction: that the idea of a world-in-itself, subsisting

3. 'Billion' and 'trillion' will be used throughout following their now internationally accepted US usage, as meaning a thousand million and a million million respectively.

independently of our relation to it, is an absurdity. Objective reality must be transcendently guaranteed, whether by pure consciousness, intersubjective consensus, or a community of rational agents; without such guarantors, it is a metaphysical chimera. Or for those who scorn what they mockingly dismiss as the ‘antiquated’ Cartesian vocabulary of ‘representationalism’, ‘subject/object dualism’, and epistemology more generally, it is our pre-theoretical relation to the world, whether characterized as *Dasein* or ‘Life’, which provides the ontological precondition for the intelligibility of the scientific claims listed above. No wonder, then, that post-Kantian philosophers routinely patronize these and other scientific assertions about the world as impoverished abstractions whose meaning supervenes on this more fundamental sub-representational or pre-theoretical relation to phenomena. For these philosophers, it is this relation to the world – *Dasein*, Existence, Life – which provides the originary condition of manifestation for all phenomena, including those ancestral phenomena featured in the statements above. Thus if the idea of a world-in-itself, of a realm of phenomena subsisting independently of our relation to it, is intelligible at all, it can only be intelligible as something in-itself or independent ‘for-us’. This is the reigning *doxa* of post-metaphysical philosophy: what is fundamental is neither a hypostasized substance, nor the reified subject, but rather the relation between un-objectifiable thinking and un-representable being, the primordial reciprocity or ‘co-proprietation’ of *logos* and *physis* which at once unites and distinguishes the terms which it relates. This premium on relationality in post-metaphysical philosophy – whose

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telling symptom is the preoccupation with ‘difference’ – has become an orthodoxy which is all the more insidious for being constantly touted as a profound innovation.⁴

Meillassoux has given it a name: ‘correlationism’. Correlationism affirms the indissoluble primacy of the relation between thought and its correlate over the metaphysical hypostatization or representationalist reification of either term of the relation. Correlationism is subtle: it never denies that our thoughts or utterances *aim at* or *intend* mind-independent or language-independent realities; it merely stipulates that this apparently independent dimension remains internally related to thought and language. Thus contemporary correlationism dismisses the problematic of scepticism, and of epistemology more generally, as an antiquated Cartesian hang-up: there is supposedly no problem about how we are able to adequately represent reality, since we are ‘always already’ outside ourselves and immersed in or engaging with the world (and indeed, this particular platitude is constantly touted as the great Heideggerian–Wittgensteinian insight).

4. Graham Harman has elaborated a profound critique of this tendency in contemporary philosophy, seeing in it an avatar of a generalized anti-realism. Whether the relation in question is the epistemological relation between mind and world, the phenomenological relation between noesis and noema, the ekstastic relation between *Sein* and *Dasein*, the prehensive relation between event-objects, or the processual relation between matter and memory, Harman argues that this premium on relationality occludes the discontinuous reality of objects in favour of their reciprocal idealizations. Harman’s startlingly original interpretation of Heidegger provides the point of departure for his complete re-orientation of phenomenology away from the primacy of the human relation to things and toward things themselves considered independently of their relation to humans or each other. Accordingly, the fundamental task for this ‘object-oriented philosophy’ consists in explaining how autonomous objects can ever interact with each other, and to that end Harman has developed a particularly ingenious theory of ‘vicarious causation’ – See Harman’s contribution to the present volume, 171-205.

Note that correlationism need not privilege ‘thinking’ or ‘consciousness’ as the key relation – it can just as easily replace it with ‘being-in-the-world’, ‘perception’, ‘sensibility’, ‘intuition’, ‘affect’, or even ‘flesh’. Indeed, all of these terms have featured in the specifically phenomenological varieties of correlationism.⁵

But the arche-fossil presents a quandary for the correlationist. For how is the correlationist to make sense of science’s ancestral claims? Correlationism insists that there can be no cognizable reality independently of our relation to reality; no phenomena without some transcendental operator – such as life or consciousness or *Dasein* – generating the conditions of manifestation through which phenomena manifest themselves. In the absence of this originary relation and these transcendental conditions of manifestation, nothing can be manifest, apprehended, thought or known. Thus, the correlationist will continue, not even the phenomena described by the sciences are

5. The writings of Husserl and Heidegger are littered with paradigmatic expressions of the correlationist credo. Here are just two examples:

The existence of Nature *cannot* be the condition for the existence of consciousness, since Nature itself turns out to be a correlate of consciousness: Nature *is* only as being constituted in regular concatenations of consciousness. (Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Book One*. Tr. F. Kersten, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 1982: 116).

[S]trictly speaking we cannot say: there was a time when there were no human beings. At every *time*, there were and are and will be human beings, because time temporalizes itself only as long as there are human beings. There is no time in which there were no human beings, not because there are human beings from all eternity, but because time is not eternity, and time always temporalizes itself only at one time, as human, historical Dasein. (Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, tr. G. Fried and R. Polt, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000: 88-9).

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possible independently of the relation through which phenomena become manifest. Moreover, the correlationist will add, it is precisely the transcendental nature of the correlation as *sine qua non* for cognition that obviates the possibility of empirical idealism. Thus, *contra* Berkeley, Kant maintains that known things are not dependent upon being perceived precisely because known things are representations and representations are generated via transcendental syntheses of categorial form and sensible material. Synthesis is rooted in pure apperception, which yields the transcendental form of the object as its necessary correlate and guarantor of objectivity. The transcendental object is not cognizable, since it provides the form of objectivity which subsumes all cognizable objects; all of which must be linked to one another within the chains of causation encompassed by the unity of possible experience and circumscribed by the reciprocal poles of transcendental subject and transcendental object. Yet the arche-fossil indexes a reality which does not fall between these poles and which refuses to be integrated into the web of possible experience linking all cognizable objects to one another, because it occurred in a time *anterior to the possibility of experience*. Thus the arche-fossil points to a cognizable reality which is not given in the transcendental object of possible experience. This is a possibility which Kant explicitly denies:

Thus we can say that the real things of past time are given in the transcendental object of experience; but they are objects for me and real in past time only in so far as I represent to myself (either by the light of history or by the guiding clues of a series of causes and effects) that a

regressive series of possible perceptions in accordance with empirical laws, in a word, that the course of the world, conducts us to a past time-series as the condition of the present time – a series which, however, can be represented as actual not in itself but only in the connection of a possible experience. *Accordingly, all events which have taken place in the immense periods that have preceded my own existence really mean nothing but the possibility of extending the chain of experience from the present perception back to the conditions which determine this perception in respect of time.*⁶

For Kant, then, the ancestral time of the arche-fossil cannot be represented as existing in itself but only as connected to a possible experience. But we cannot represent to ourselves any regressive series of possible perceptions in accordance with empirical laws capable of conducting us from our present perceptions to the ancestral time indexed by the arche-fossil. It is strictly impossible to prolong the chain of experience from our contemporary perception of the radioactive isotope to the time of the accretion of the earth indexed by its radiation, because the totality of the temporal series coextensive with possible experience itself emerged out of that geological time wherein there simply was no perception. We cannot extend the chain of possible perceptions back prior to the emergence of nervous systems, which provide the material conditions for the possibility of perceptual experience.

Thus it is precisely the necessity of an originary correlation, whether between knower and known, or *Sein* and *Dasein*, that science's ancestral statements flatly

6. *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. N. K. Smith (London: MacMillan 1929), A495; emphasis added.

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contradict. For in flagrant disregard of those transcendental conditions which are supposed to be necessary for every manifestation, they describe occurrences anterior to the emergence of life, and objects existing independently of any relation to thought. Similarly, science's descendent statements refer to events occurring after the extinction of life and the annihilation of thought. But how can such statements be true if correlationism is sound? For not only do they designate events occurring quite independently of the existence of life and thought; they inscribe the transcendental conditions of manifestation themselves within a merely empirical timeline. How can the relation to reality embodied in life or thought be characterized as transcendently necessary (*sine qua non*) for the possibility of spatiotemporal manifestation when science unequivocally states that life and thought, and hence this fundamental relation, have a determinate beginning and end in space-time? Don't science's ancestral and descendent statements strongly imply that those ontologically generative conditions of spatiotemporal manifestation privileged by correlationists – *Dasein*, life, consciousness, and so on – are themselves merely spatiotemporal occurrences like any other?

2. THE CORRELATIONIST RESPONSE

Confronted by Meillassoux's argument from the arche-fossil, partisans of correlationism have not been slow in mounting a counter-offensive. In a supplement to the forthcoming English translation of *Après la finitude*, Meillassoux recapitulates the two most frequently voiced objections and responds to both. The correlationist defence

is two-tiered. In the first stage, Meillassoux is accused of inflating an un-observed phenomenon into a negation of correlation, when in fact it is merely a lacuna in correlation. In the second stage, Meillassoux is deemed guilty of naively conflating the empirical and the transcendental. We will consider each of these objections, as well as Meillassoux's responses to them, in turn.

In the first stage, the correlationist contends that, far from being novel and challenging, the argument from the arche-fossil is merely a restatement of a hackneyed and rather feeble objection to transcendental idealism. Thus, the correlationist continues, the arche-fossil is simply an example of a phenomenon which went un-perceived. But un-perceived phenomena occur all the time and it is excessively naive to think they suffice to undermine the transcendental status of the correlation. In this regard, the temporal distance which separates us from the ancestral phenomenon is no different in kind from the spatial distance which separates us from contemporaneous but unobserved events occurring elsewhere in the universe. Thus the fact that there was no-one around 4.5 billion years ago to perceive the accretion of the earth is no more significant than the fact that there is currently no-one 25 million, million miles away perceiving events on the surface of Alpha Centauri. Moreover, the notion of 'distance' is an inherently ambiguous and unreliable indicator of the limits of perception: technology allows us to perceive objects extraordinarily far away in space and time, while myriad occurrences close at hand routinely go unperceived. In this regard, instances of spatiotemporal extremity are no different in kind from other banal

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instances of un-witnessed or un-perceived phenomena, such as the fact that we are never aware of everything going on inside our own bodies. Thus the arche-fossil is just another example of an un-perceived phenomenon and, as with all other examples of un-perceived phenomena, it merely exemplifies the inherently *lacunary* nature of manifestation – the fact that no phenomenon is ever exhaustively or absolutely apprehended by perception or consciousness. Far from denying this, both Kant and Husserl emphasized the intrinsically limited and finite nature of human cognition. Thus for Kant sensible intuition is incapable of exhaustively apprehending the infinite complexity of a datum of sensation. Similarly for Husserl, intentionality proceeds by adumbrations which never exhaust all the dimensions of the phenomenon. But the fact that every phenomenon harbours an un-apprehended remainder in no way undermines the constitutive status of transcendental consciousness. All that it shows is that manifestation is inherently lacunary and that the non-manifest inheres in every manifestation. A counterfactual suffices to establish the persistence of transcendental constitution even in cases of lacunary manifestation such as the arche-fossil. Thus the contingent fact that no-one was there to witness the accretion of the earth is ultimately of no importance; for *had there been* a witness, they *would have* perceived the phenomenon of accretion unfolding in conformity with the laws of geology and physics which are transcendently guaranteed by the correlation. Ultimately, the correlationist concludes, the argument from the arche-fossil fails to challenge correlationism because it has simply confused a contingent lacuna in manifestation with the

necessary absence of manifestation.

Against this initial line of defence, Meillassoux insists that the arche-fossil cannot be reduced to an example of the un-perceived because the temporal anteriority involved in the notion of ancestry remains irreducible to any notion of temporal ‘distance’ concomitant with correlational manifestation. To reduce the arche-fossil to an un-witnessed or un-perceived occurrence is to beg the question because it is to continue to assume that there is always a correlation in terms of which to measure gaps or lacunae within manifestation. But the arche-fossil is not merely a non-manifest gap or lacuna *in* manifestation; it is the lacuna *of* manifestation *tout court*. For the anteriority indexed by the ancestral phenomenon does not point to an earlier time *within* manifestation; it indexes a time *anterior to the time of manifestation in its entirety*; and it does so according to a sense of ‘anteriority’ which cannot be reduced to the past of manifestation because it indicates a time wherein manifestation – along with its past, present, and future dimensions – originally emerged. Thus, Meillassoux contends, the ‘ancestral’ cannot be reduced to the ‘ancient’. There are always greater or lesser degrees of ‘ancientness’ depending on whatever temporal metric one happens to choose. ‘Ancientness’ remains a function of a relation between past and present which is entirely circumscribed by the conditions of manifestation and in this sense any past, no matter how ‘ancient’, remains synchronous with the correlational present. In equating temporal remove with spatial distance, the correlationist objection outlined above continues to assume this underlying synchronicity. But ancestry indexes a radical ‘diachronicity’ which

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cannot be correlated with the present because it belongs to the time wherein the conditions of correlation between past, present, and future passed from inexistence into existence. Accordingly, ancestrality harbours a temporal diachronicity which remains incommensurable with any chronological measure that would ensure a reciprocity between the past, present, and future dimensions of the correlation.

Meillassoux detects in this initial correlationist response a subterfuge which consists in substituting a lacuna *in* and *for* manifestation – a lacuna that is contemporaneous with constituting consciousness, as is always the case with the un-perceived – for a lacuna *of* manifestation as such; one which cannot be synchronized with constituting consciousness (or whatever other transcendental operator happens to be invoked). The correlationist's sleight-of-hand here consists in reducing the arche-fossil – which is non-manifest insofar as it occurs prior to the emergence of conditions of manifestation – to the un-perceived, which is merely a measurable gap or absence within the extant conditions of manifestation. However, Meillassoux insists, the arche-fossil is neither a lacunary manifestation nor a temporal reality internal to manifestation (internal to the correlation); for it points to the temporal reality in which manifestation itself first came into existence, and wherein it will ultimately sink back into inexistence. Consequently, Meillassoux concludes, it is a serious misunderstanding to think that a counterfactual suffices to reintegrate the arche-fossil within the correlation, for the diachronicity it indexes cannot be synchronized with any correlational present.

Having failed to rebuff the argument from the arche-

fossil with this initial line of defence, the correlationist adopts a second strategy. This consists in contesting the claim that ancestry indexes a temporal dimension within which correlational temporality itself passes into and out of being. For such an assertion betrays a fundamental confusion between the *transcendental* level at which the conditions of correlation obtain and the *empirical* level at which the organisms and/or material entities which support those conditions exist. The latter are indeed spatiotemporal objects like any other, emerging and perishing within physical space-time; but the former provide the conditions of objectivation without which scientific knowledge of spatiotemporal objects – and hence of the arche-fossil itself – would not be possible. Though these conditions are physically instantiated by specific material objects – *i.e.* human organisms – they cannot be said to exist in the same manner, and hence they cannot be said to pass into or out of existence on pain of paralogism. Thus, the correlationist continues, the claim that the conditions of objectivation emerged in space-time is an absurd paralogism because it treats transcendental conditions as though they were objects alongside other objects. But the transcendental conditions of spatiotemporal objectivation do not exist spatiotemporally. This is not to say that they are eternal, for this would be to hypostatize them once again and to attribute another kind of objective existence to them, albeit in a transcendent or supernatural register. They are neither transcendent nor supernatural – they are the logical preconditions for ascriptions of existence, rather than objectively existing entities. As conditions for the scientific cognition of empirical reality – of which the

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arche-fossil is a prime example – they cannot themselves be scientifically objectified without engendering absurd paradoxes. The claim that ancestral time encompasses the birth and death of transcendental subjectivity is precisely such a paradox, but one which dissolves once the confusion from which it has arisen has been diagnosed.

Yet for Meillassoux, the initial plausibility of this response masks its underlying inadequacy, for it relies on an unacknowledged equivocation. We are told that transcendental subjectivity cannot be objectified, and hence that it neither emerges nor perishes in space-time; but also that it is neither immortal nor eternal, in the manner of a transcendent metaphysical principle. Indeed this is precisely what distinguishes transcendental subjectivity in its purported finitude from any metaphysical hypostatization of the principle of subjectivity which would render it equivalent to an infinitely enduring substance. But as finite, transcendental subjectivity is indissociable from the determinate set of material conditions which provide its empirical support. Thus Husserl insists on the necessary parallelism which renders the transcendental indissociable from the empirical. Indeed, it is this necessary parallelism which distinguishes transcendental subjectivity from its metaphysical substantialization. Accordingly, though transcendental subjectivity is merely instantiated in the minds of physical organisms, it cannot subsist independently of those minds and the organisms which support them. Although it does not exist in space and time, it has no other kind of existence apart from the spatiotemporal existence of the physical bodies in which it is instantiated. And it is precisely insofar as it is anchored in the finite minds of

bounded physical organisms with limited sensory and intellectual capacities that human reason is not infinite. But if transcendental subjectivity is necessarily instantiated in the spatiotemporal existence of physical organisms, then it is not quite accurate to claim that it can be entirely divorced from objectively existing bodies. Indeed, in the wake of Heidegger's critique of the 'worldless' or disembodied subject of classical transcendentalism, post-Heideggerean philosophy can be said to have engaged in an increasing 'corporealization' of the transcendental. Merleau-Ponty is probably the most prominent (though certainly not the only) advocate of the quasi-transcendental status of embodiment. Accordingly, although transcendental subjectivity may not be reducible to objectively existing bodies, neither can it be divorced from them, for the existence of bodies – and *a fortiori* of language, society, history, culture, etc. – provides the conditions of instantiation for the transcendental (i.e. the 'always already'). Thus, Meillassoux concludes, while it is perfectly plausible to insist that the correlation provides the transcendental condition for knowledge of spatiotemporal existence, it is also necessary to point out that the time in which the bodies that provide the conditions of instantiation for the correlation emerge and perish is also the time which determines the conditions of instantiation of the transcendental. But the ancestral time which determines the conditions of instantiation of the transcendental cannot be encompassed within the time that is co-extensive with the correlation, because it is the time within which those corporeal conditions upon which the correlation depends pass into and out of existence. Where such conditions of

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instantiation are absent, so is the correlation. Thus the ancestral time indexed by the arche-fossil is simply the time of the inexistence of the correlation. This ancestral time is indexed by objective phenomena such as the arche-fossil; but its existence does not depend upon those conditions of objectivation upon which knowledge of the arche-fossil depends, because it determines those conditions of instantiation which determine conditions of objectivation.

3. ANCESTRALITY AND CHRONOLOGY

Meillassoux's responses to his correlationist critics are as trenchant as they are resourceful and they undoubtedly constitute a significant addition to his already weighty case against correlationism. However, they also invite a number of critical observations. First, it is not at all clear how Meillassoux's distinction between ancestry and spatiotemporal distance can be squared with what twentieth-century physics has taught us concerning the fundamental indissociability of time and space, as enshrined in the Einstein-Minkowski conception of four-dimensional space-time. 'Anteriority' and 'posteriority' are inherently relational terms which can only be rendered intelligible from within a spatiotemporal frame of reference. In this regard, Meillassoux's insistence on the irreconcilable disjunction between a lacuna *in* manifestation and the lacuna *of* manifestation continues to rely on an appeal to the scalar incommensurability between the anthropomorphic time privileged by correlationism and the cosmological time within which the former is nested. This incommensurability is attributed to the fundamental asymmetry between cosmological and anthropomorphic

time: whereas the former is presumed to encompass the beginning and end of the latter, the reverse is assumed not to be the case. However, Meillassoux conducts his case against correlationism in a logical rather than empirical register – indeed, we shall see below how this leads him to reiterate the dualism of thought and extension – yet the asymmetry to which he appeals here is precisely a function of empirical fact, and as Meillassoux himself acknowledges,⁷ there is no *a priori* reason why the existence of mind, and hence of the correlation, could not happen to be coextensive with the existence of the universe. Indeed, this is precisely the claim of Hegelianism, which construes mind or *Geist* as a self-relating negativity already inherent in material reality. Accordingly, the transcendence which Meillassoux ascribes to ancestral time as that which exists independently of correlation continues to rely upon an appeal to chronology: it is the (empirical) fact that cosmological time *preceded* anthropomorphic time and will presumably *succeed* it which is invoked in the account of the asymmetry between the two. In light of this implicit appeal to chronology in Meillassoux's claim that the arche-fossil indexes the absence of manifestation, rather than any hiatus within it, it is difficult to see how the temporal anteriority which he ascribes to the ancestral realm could ever be understood wholly independently of the spatiotemporal framework in terms of which cosmology coordinates relations between past, present, and future events. A simple change in the framework which determines chronology would suffice to dissolve the alleged incommensurability between ancestral and anthropomorphic

7. Cf. *Après la finitude*, 161.

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time, thereby bridging the conceptual abyss which is supposed to separate anteriority from spatiotemporal distance.

The conclusion to be drawn is the following: as long as the autonomy of the in-itself is construed in terms of a merely chronological discrepancy between cosmological and anthropomorphic time, it will always be possible for the correlationist to convert the supposedly absolute anteriority attributed to the ancestral realm into an anteriority which is merely 'for us', not 'in itself'. By tethering his challenge to correlationism to the spatiotemporal framework favoured by contemporary cosmology, Meillassoux mortgages the autonomy of the in-itself to chronology. The only hope for securing the unequivocal independence of the '*an sich*' must lie in prizing it free from chronology as well as phenomenology. This would entail a conception of objectivity which excludes chronological relationality as much as phenomenological intentionality. Spatiotemporal relations should be construed as a function of objective reality; rather than objective reality construed as a function of spatiotemporal relations. By insisting on driving a wedge between ancestral time and spatiotemporal distance, Meillassoux inadvertently reiterates the privileging of time over space which is so symptomatic of idealism and unwittingly endorses his opponents' claim that all non-ancestral reality can be un-problematically accounted for by the correlation. Thus the trenchancy of Meillassoux's rejoinders above actually masks a significant concession to correlationism. For surely it is not just ancestral phenomena which challenge the latter, but simply the reality described by the modern natural sciences *tout*

court. According to the latter, we are surrounded by processes going on quite independently of any relationship we may happen to have to them: thus plate tectonics, thermonuclear fusion, and galactic expansion (not to mention undiscovered oil reserves or unknown insect species) are as much autonomous, human-independent realities as the accretion of the earth. The fact that these processes are contemporaneous with the existence of consciousness, while the accretion of the earth preceded it, is quite irrelevant. To maintain the contrary, and insist that it is only the ancestral dimension that transcends correlational constitution, is to imply that the emergence of consciousness marks some sort of fundamental ontological rupture, shattering the autonomy and consistency of reality, such that once consciousness has emerged on the scene, nothing can pursue an independent existence any more. The danger is that in privileging the arche-fossil as sole paradigm of a mind-independent reality, Meillassoux is ceding too much ground to the correlationism he wishes to destroy.⁸

3. THE PRINCIPLE OF FACTUALITY

Meillassoux distinguishes between two varieties of correlationism: weak correlationism, which claims that we can *think* noumena even though we cannot *know* them, and strong correlationism, which claims that we cannot even think them. Weak correlationism, exemplified by Kant, insists on the finitude of reason and the conditional nature of our access to being. The conditions for knowledge (the

8. I am indebted to Graham Harman, Robin Mackay, and Damian Veal for all these critical points.

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categories and forms of intuition) apply only to the phenomenal realm, not to things in-themselves. Thus the cognitive structures governing the phenomenal realm are not necessary features of things-in-themselves. We cannot know why space and time are the only two forms of intuition or why there are twelve rather than eleven or thirteen categories. There is no sufficient reason capable of accounting for such a fact. In this sense, and this sense alone, these transcendental structures are contingent. But Hegel will point out that Kant has already overstepped the boundary between the knowable and the unknowable in presuming to know that the structure of things-in-themselves differs from the structure of phenomena. Accordingly, Hegel will proceed to re-inject that which is transcendently constitutive of the 'for us' back into the 'in-itself'. Thus in Hegel's absolute idealism thinking grounds its own access to being once more and rediscovers its intrinsic infinitude. Where Kant's weak correlationism emphasises the uncircumventable contingency inherent in the correlation between thinking and being, Hegelianism absolutizes the correlation and thereby insists on the necessary isomorphy between the structure of thinking and that of being. In this regard, strong correlationism, which encompasses everything from phenomenology to pragmatism, can be understood as a critical rejoinder to the Hegelian absolutization of correlation. Though strong correlationism also jettisons the thing-in-itself, it retains the Kantian premium on the ineluctable contingency of the correlation, which Heidegger famously radicalizes in the notion of 'facticity'. Thus strong correlationism, as exemplified by figures such as Heidegger and Foucault,

insists – contra Hegel – that the contingency of correlation cannot be rationalised or grounded in reason. This is the anti-metaphysical import of Heidegger’s epochal ‘history of being’ or of Foucault’s ‘archaeologies of knowledge’. Accordingly, if we are to break with correlationism, we must re-legitimate the possibility of thinking the thing-in-itself, yet do so without either absolutizing correlation or resorting to the Principle of Sufficient Reason.

In a remarkable *tour de force*, Meillassoux shows how what is most powerful in strong correlationism can be used to overcome it from within. And what is most powerful in it is precisely its insistence on the facticity of correlation. For on what basis does strong correlationism reject the Hegelian rehabilitation of the Principle of Sufficient Reason – the claim that contradiction is the ground of being – and the ensuing isomorphy between thinking and being? It does so by insisting on the facticity or non-necessity of correlation against its Hegelian absolutization – thought’s access to being is extrinsically conditioned by non-conceptual factors, which cannot be rationalised or reincorporated within the concept, not even in the form of dialectical contradiction. Thus, in order to emphasize the primacy of facticity against the speculative temptation to absolutize correlation, strong correlationism must insist that everything is without reason – even correlation itself. Against Hegel’s speculative idealism, which seeks to show how the correlation can demonstrate its own necessity by grounding itself, thereby becoming absolutely necessary or *causa sui*, strong correlationism must maintain that such self-grounding is impossible by demonstrating that the correlation cannot know itself to be necessary. For though

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we can claim that an empirical phenomenon is necessary or contingent in conformity with the transcendental principles governing the possibility of knowledge, we cannot know whether these principles themselves are either necessary or contingent, for we have nothing to compare them to. This argument proceeds on the basis of a distinction between contingency, which is under the jurisdiction of knowledge, and facticity, which is not. Contingency is empirical and pertains to phenomena: a phenomenon is contingent if it can come into or out of existence without violating the principles of cognition that govern phenomena. Facticity is transcendental and pertains to our cognitive relation to phenomena, and hence to the principles of knowledge themselves, concerning which it makes no sense to say either that they are necessary or that they are contingent, since we have no other principles to compare them to. Against absolute idealism then, strong correlationism insists that to affirm the necessity of the correlation is to contravene the norms of knowledge. Yet in so doing, it violates its own stricture: for in order to claim that the correlation is not necessary, it has no choice but to affirm its contingency.

Accordingly, strong correlationism is obliged to contravene its own distinction between what is knowable and what is unknowable in order to protect it; it must assert the contingency of correlation in order to contradict the idealist's assertion of its necessity. But to affirm the contingency of correlation is also to assert the necessity of facticity and hence to overstep the boundary between what can be known – contingency – and what cannot be known – facticity – in the very movement that is supposed to

reassert its inviolability. For in order to maintain the contingency of correlation and stave off absolute idealism, strong correlationism must insist on the necessity of its facticity – but it cannot do so without knowing something which, by its own lights, it is not supposed to know. Thus it finds itself confronted with the following dilemma: it cannot de-absolutize facticity without absolutizing the correlation; yet it cannot de-absolutize the correlation without absolutizing facticity. But to absolutize facticity is to assert the unconditional necessity of its contingency and hence to assert that it is possible to think something that exists independently of thought's relation to it: contingency as such. In absolutizing facticity, correlationism subverts the empirical-transcendental divide separating knowable contingency from unknowable facticity even as it strives to maintain it; but it is thereby forced to acknowledge that what it took to be a negative characteristic of our relation to things – *viz.*, that we cannot know whether the principles of cognition are necessary or contingent – is in fact a positive characteristic of things-in-themselves.

It is worthwhile pausing here to underline the decisive distinction between the idealist and realist variants of the speculative overcoming of correlationism. Speculative idealism claims that the in-itself is not some transcendent object standing 'outside' the correlation, but is rather nothing other than the correlation as such. Thus it converts relationality *per se* into a thing-in-itself or absolute: the dialectician claims that we overcome the metaphysical reification of the in-itself when we realize that what we took to be merely for-us is in fact in-itself. Correlation is

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absolutized when it becomes in-itself for-itself. But this involves transforming correlation into a metaphysically necessary entity or *causa sui*. By way of contrast, Meillassoux's speculative materialism asserts that the only way to preserve the in-itself from its idealist incorporation into the for-us without reifying it metaphysically is by realizing that what is in-itself is the *contingency* of the for-us, not its necessity. Thus, when facticity is absolutized, it is the contingency or groundlessness of the for-us (the correlation) which becomes in-itself or necessary precisely insofar as its contingency is not something which is merely for-us. Speculative materialism asserts that, in order to maintain our ignorance of the necessity of correlation, we have to know that its contingency is necessary. In other words, if we can never know the necessity of anything, this is not because necessity is unknowable but because we know that only contingency necessarily exists. What is absolute is the fact that everything is necessarily contingent or 'without-reason'.

Consequently, when forced to pursue the ultimate consequences of its own premises, correlationism is obliged to turn our ignorance concerning the necessity or contingency of our knowledge of phenomena into a thinkable property of things-in-themselves. The result, as Meillassoux puts it, is that '[t]he absolute is the absolute impossibility of a necessary being'.⁹ This is Meillassoux's 'principle of factuality' and though it might seem exceedingly slight, its implications are far from trivial. For it imposes significant constraints upon thought. If a necessary being is conceptually impossible then the only

9 *Après la finitude*, 82.

absolute is the real possibility of the completely arbitrary and radically unpredictable transformation of all things from one moment to the next. It is important not to confuse this with familiar Heraclitean or Nietzschean paeans to absolute becoming, for the latter merely substitutes the metaphysical necessity of perpetual differentiation for the metaphysical necessity of perpetual identity. To affirm the metaphysical primacy of becoming is to claim that it is impossible for things not to change; impossible for things to stay the same; and *ergo* to claim that it is necessary for things to keep changing. The flux of ceaseless becoming is thereby conceived as ineluctable and metaphysically necessary as unchanging stasis. But metaphysical necessity, whether it be that of perpetual flux or of permanent fixity, is precisely what the principle of absolute contingency rules out. The necessity of contingency, Meillassoux maintains, implies an ‘absolute time’ which can interrupt the flux of becoming with the same arbitrary capriciousness as it can scramble the fixity of being. Absolute time is tantamount to a ‘hyper-chaos’ for which nothing is impossible, unless it be the production of a necessary being. It is a contingency which usurps every possible order, including the order of disorder or the constancy of inconstancy. It is all-powerful; but an absolute power which is ‘without norms, blind, and devoid of all the other divine perfections [...] It is a power possessing neither goodness nor wisdom [...] a time capable of destroying becoming itself by bringing forth, perhaps forever, fixity, stasis, and death.’¹⁰

10. *Ibid.*, 88.

4. THE PARADOX OF ABSOLUTE CONTINGENCY

In a move that effectively sidesteps the entire problematic of representation, Meillassoux boldly declares his intention to reinstate intellectual intuition:

[W]e must project unreason into the thing itself, and discover in our grasp of facticity the veritable intellectual intuition of the absolute. ‘Intuition’, since it is well and truly in [à même] *what is* that we discover a contingency with no bounds other than itself; ‘intellectual’, since this contingency is nothing visible, nothing perceptible in the thing: only thought can access it as it accesses the Chaos which underlies the apparent continuities of phenomena.¹¹

The deployment of this presumably non-metaphysical variety of intellectual intuition circumvents Kant’s critical distinction between knowable phenomena and unknowable things-in-themselves – between reality as we relate to it through representation and reality as it is independently of our representational relation to it – and rehabilitates the distinction between primary and secondary qualities; the former being mathematically intuitable features of things-in-themselves; the latter being phenomenological features of our relation to things.¹² This reinstatement of intellectual intuition is of a piece with Meillassoux’s overturning of Kant’s critical delimitation of the possibilities of reason. Intellectual intuition now provides us with direct access to a realm of pure possibility coextensive with absolute time. Kant displaced the metaphysical hypostatization of logical possibility by

11. *Ibid.*, 111.

12. *Ibid.*, 28.

subordinating the latter to a domain of real possibility circumscribed by reason's relation to sensibility. Time *qua* form of transcendental synthesis grounds the structure of possibility.¹³ But Meillassoux's absolutization of contingency effectively absolutizes the *a priori* realm of pure logical possibility and untethers the domain of mathematical intelligibility from sensibility. This severing of the possible from the sensible is underwritten by the chaotic structure of absolute time. Where the bounds of real possibility remain circumscribed by the correlational *a priori*, intellectual intuition uncovers a realm of absolute possibility whose only constraint is non-contradiction. Moreover, where real possibility is subsumed by time as form of transcendental subjectivity, absolute possibility indexes a time no longer anchored in the coherence of a subjective relation to reality or in the correlation between thinking and being. Thus the intellectual intuition of absolute possibility underwrites the 'diachronicity' of thinking and being; a diachronicity which for Meillassoux is implicit in the ancestral dimension of being uncovered by modern science. In ratifying the diachronicity of thinking and being, modern science exposes thought's contingency for being: although thought needs being, being does not need thought.

The question, then, is whether Meillassoux's reinstatement of intellectual intuition may not compromise the very asymmetry which he takes to be science's speculative import. Similarly, it may be that the Galilean hypothesis harbours ramifications concerning the

13. This is the upshot of Heidegger's reinterpretation of Kant in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, tr. R. Taft (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990).

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mathematization of thinking which also vitiates Meillassoux's appeal to intellectual intuition. To consider these questions, we must examine the distinction which Meillassoux invokes in order to stave off idealism. This is the distinction between the reality of the ancestral phenomenon and the *ideality* of the ancestral statement. It is on the basis of this distinction that Meillassoux, like Badiou, seeks to distance himself from the Pythagorean thesis according to which being is mathematical:

[W]e will maintain that, for their part, the statements bearing on the ancestral phenomenon which can be mathematically formulated designate effective properties of the event in question (its date, its duration, its extension), even though no observer was present to experience it directly. Accordingly, we will maintain a Cartesian thesis about matter, but not, let us underline this, a Pythagorean one: we shall not claim that the being of the ancestral phenomenon is intrinsically mathematical, or that the numbers and equations deployed in ancestral statements exist in themselves. For it would then be necessary to maintain that the ancestral phenomenon is a reality every bit as ideal as that of a number or an equation. Generally speaking, statements are ideal insofar as they possess a signifying reality; but their eventual referents are not necessarily ideal (the cat on the mat is real, though the statement 'The cat is on the mat' is ideal.) In this regard, we will say that the referents of ancestral statements bearing on dates, volumes, etc. existed 4.56 billion years ago as described by these statements – but not these statements themselves, which are contemporaneous with us.¹⁴

14. *Après la finitude*, 28-9.

This distinction between the reality of the ancestral phenomenon and the ideality of the ancestral statement is necessary in order to maintain the ontological disjunction between the correlational present and the ancestral past – precisely the diachronicity which correlationism cannot countenance. Nevertheless, if Meillassoux evokes such a distinction, he cannot sequester it on the side of being alone, for it must pertain to thinking as well as to being. Thus this secondary disjunction between real and ideal subdivides both poles of the primary disjunction between thinking and being: thought possesses a real and an ideal aspect, just as being possesses real and ideal features. Clearly, the diachronicity harboured by the arche-fossil can only be indexed by a disjunction between the ideality of the ancestral statement and the reality of the ancestral phenomenon which promises to prove irreducible to the neighbouring distinctions between the real and ideal aspect of thought and the real and ideal features of being, for both of these remain entirely encompassed by the correlation between thinking and being. For the point of Meillassoux's distinction between physical reality and discursive ideality is to discount the idealist claim that the reality of the phenomenon is exhausted by its mathematical idealization in the statement. Although the reality of the ancestral phenomenon can be mathematically encoded, it must transcend this mathematical inscription, otherwise Meillassoux finds himself endorsing Pythagoreanism. And as Meillassoux well knows, the latter provides no bulwark against correlationism, since it effectively renders being isomorphic with mathematical ideality. The point seems to be that the reality of the ancestral phenomenon must be

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independent of its mathematical intellection – being does not depend upon the existence of mathematics. But Meillassoux’s problem consists in identifying a speculative guarantor for this disjunction between reality and ideality which would be entirely independent of the evidence provided by the mathematical idealization of the ancestral phenomenon in the ancestral statement. To rely upon the latter would be to render this speculative disjunction supervenient upon the procedures of post-critical epistemology and thus to find oneself confronted by the injunction to verify or otherwise justify it within the ambit of the correlationist circle.

Thus the question confronting Meillassoux’s speculative materialism is: under what conditions would this secondary disjunction between the real and the ideal be intellectually intuitable without reinstating a correlation at the level of the primary disjunction between thinking and being? To render the distinction between the reality of the phenomenon and the ideality of the statement dependent upon intellectual intuition is to leave it entirely encompassed by one pole of the primary disjunction, *i.e.* thought, and hence to recapitulate the correlationist circle. For just as we cannot maintain that this primary disjunction is intellectually intuitable without reinscribing being within the ideal pole of the secondary disjunction, similarly, we cannot maintain that the secondary disjunction is encoded in the ancestral statement without reincorporating the real within the noetic pole of the primary disjunction. How, then, are we to guarantee the disjunction between real and ideal independently of the intelligible ideality of science’s ancestral claims? For the

ideality of the latter cannot be a guarantor of the reality of the former. Moreover, intellectual intuition subsumes both poles of the secondary disjunction within one pole of the primary disjunction.

Consequently, Meillassoux is forced into the difficult position of attempting to reconcile the claim that being is not inherently mathematical with the claim that being is intrinsically accessible to intellectual intuition. He cannot maintain that being is mathematical without lapsing into Pythagorean idealism; but this relapse into Pythagoreanism is precluded only at the cost of the idealism which renders being the correlate of intellectual intuition. The problem lies in trying to square the Galilean-Cartesian hypothesis that being is mathematizable with an insistence on the speculative disjunction whereby being is held to subsist independently of its mathematical intuitability. Part of the difficulty resides in the fact that although Meillassoux presumably discounts metaphysical and phenomenological conceptions of being, whether as necessary substance or eidetic presence, since both are encompassed within the correlationist circle, he has not provided us with a non-metaphysical and non-phenomenological alternative – such as we find, for example, in Badiou's subtractive conception of the void.¹⁵ Like Badiou, Meillassoux recuses the Kantian formulation of the problematic of access while striving to uphold the authority of scientific rationality. However, unlike Badiou, he does not characterize ontology as a situation within which the presentation of being is subtractively inscribed in such a way as to obviate any straightforwardly metaphysical or phenomenological

15. Cf. *Being and Event*, tr. O. Feltham (London: Continuum, 2006).

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correlation between thought and being.

But as a result he must explain why – given that science teaches us that intellection is in no way an ineliminable feature of reality but merely a contingent by-product of evolutionary history, and given that for Meillassoux himself reality can be neither inherently mathematical nor *necessarily* intelligible – being should be susceptible to intellectual intuition. In this regard, it is worth noting that one of the more significant ramifications of the Galilean-Cartesian hypothesis about the mathematizability of nature consists in the recent endeavour to deploy the resources of mathematical modelization in order to develop a science of cognition. Admittedly, the latter is still in its infancy; nevertheless, its maturation promises to obviate the Cartesian dualism of thought and extension – and perhaps also the residues of the latter which subsist in Meillassoux's own brand of speculative materialism – while conceding nothing to correlationism. The diachronic disjunction between thinking and being is not the only speculative implication harboured by modern science; the development of a science of cognition implies that we, unlike Descartes and Kant, can no longer presume to exempt thought from the reality to which it provides access, or continue to attribute an exceptional status to it.

If thought can no longer be presumed to exempt itself from the reality which it thinks, and if the real can no longer be directly mapped onto being, or the ideal directly mapped onto thought, then thinking itself must be reintegrated into any speculative enquiry into the nature of reality. Thus the central question raised by Meillassoux's speculative materialism becomes: Does the principle of

factuality, which states that ‘everything that exists is necessarily contingent’, *include itself* in its designation of ‘everything’? Like Badiou, Meillassoux sees Cantor as having definitively pulverized the concept of ‘totality’, so that the latter is now devoid of ontological pertinence. But we do not have to assume a spurious totalization of existence to enquire whether the thought that everything is necessarily contingent is itself necessarily contingent. On the contrary, all that we assume is that thinking is just a contingent fact like any other. What we should refuse, however, is the claim that it is necessary to exempt the thought that ‘everything is necessarily contingent’ from the existential ‘fact’ that everything is contingent on the grounds that a transcendental abyss separates thinking from being. Once the recourse to this transcendental divide has been ruled out, we are obliged to consider what follows if the principle refers to itself. More precisely, we must consider whether the truth of the principle, and *a fortiori* Meillassoux’s speculative overcoming of correlationism, entails its self-reference. Here we have to distinguish between the contingency of the existence of the thought, which does *not* generate paradox, and the contingency of the truth of the thought, which does. Two distinct possibilities can be envisaged depending on whether the thought does or does not refer to itself. First let us consider what follows if it does refer to itself. Then if the thought exists, it must be contingent. But if it is contingent then its negation could equally exist: ‘Not everything is necessarily contingent’. But in order for the thought to exclude the possibility of the truth of its negation, then its truth must be necessary, which means that the thought must exist

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necessarily. But if it exists necessarily then not everything that exists is necessarily contingent; there is at least one thing which is not, *i.e.* the thought itself. Thus if the thought refers to itself it necessitates the existence of its own negation; but in order to deny the possible truth of its negation it has to affirm its own necessary truth, and hence contradict itself once more. What if the thought does not refer to itself? Then there is something which is necessary, but which is not included under the rubric of existence. Reality is 'not-all' because the thought that 'everything is necessarily contingent' is an ideality which exempts itself from the reality which it designates. But then not only does this very exemption become necessary for the intelligible ideality of the thought that 'everything is necessarily contingent', but the intelligibility of reality understood as the necessary existence of contingency becomes dependent upon the coherence of a thought whose exemption from reality is necessary in order for reality to be thought as necessarily contingent. Thus the attempt to exempt the ideal from the real threatens to re-instantiate the correlationist circle once more. Lastly, let us consider the possibility that the necessary contingency of existence does not depend on the truth of the thought 'everything is necessarily contingent'. If everything is necessarily contingent regardless of the truth of the thought 'everything is necessarily contingent', then everything could be necessarily contingent even if we had no way of thinking the truth of that thought coherently. But this is to re-introduce the possibility of a radical discrepancy between the coherence of thinking and the way the world is in-itself – any irrational hypothesis about

the latter become possible and strong correlationism looms once again.

Whatever the shortcomings attendant upon their lack of formal stringency, these conjectures seem to point to a fundamental dilemma confronting Meillassoux's project. If he accepts – as we believe he must – that thinking is part of being as the second fundamental speculative implication of scientific rationality after that of diachronicity, then the universal scope of the principle of factuality generates a paradox whereby it seems to contradict itself: the claim that everything is necessarily contingent is only true if this thought exists necessarily. Alternatively, if Meillassoux decides to uphold the exceptional status of thinking vis-à-vis being then he seems to compromise his insistence on diachronicity, for the intelligible reality of contingent being is rendered dependent upon the ideal coherence of the principle of factuality. Indeed, the appeal to intellectual intuition in the formulation of the principle already seems to assume some sort of reciprocity between thinking and being

As one might expect, both these criticisms – *viz.*, that intellectual intuition reestablishes a correlation between thought and being and that the principle of factuality engenders a paradox – have elicited typically acute responses from Meillassoux. In a personal communication, Meillassoux has explained why he believes he can parry both objections. For Meillassoux, the principle of factuality is designed to satisfy two requirements. First, the fundamental *rationalist* requirement that reality be perfectly amenable to conceptual comprehension. This is a rebuttal of the prototypical religious notion that existence harbors

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some sort of transcendent mystery forever refractory to intellection. Second, the basic *materialist* requirement that being, though perfectly intelligible, remain irreducible to thought. Meillassoux insists that the claim that everything that is is necessarily contingent satisfies both criteria. In his own words:

Being is thought without-remainder insofar as it is without-reason; and the being that is thought in this way is conceived as exceeding thought on all sides because it shows itself to be capable of producing and destroying thought as well as every other sort of entity. As a factual act produced by an equally factual thinking being, the intellectual intuition of facticity is perfectly susceptible to destruction, but not that which, albeit only for an instant, it will have thought as the eternal truth which legitimates its name, *viz.*, that it is itself perishable just like everything else that exists. [...] Thus, it is on account of its capacity for a-rational emergence that being exceeds on all sides whatever thought is able to describe of its factual production; nevertheless, it contains nothing unfathomable for thought because being's excess over thought just indicates that reason is forever absent from being, not some eternally enigmatic power.¹⁶

These remarks already prefigure Meillassoux's recusal of the second objection, *viz.*, that if applied to itself, the principle of factuality becomes contradictory. Meillassoux maintains that the paradox can be averted by carefully distinguishing the referent of the principle from its (factual) existence. Thus, though the latter is indeed contingent, and hence as liable to be as not to be, the former is strictly

16. Personal Communication, 9/8/2006.

necessary, and indeed it is the eternal necessity of the principle's referent that guarantees the perpetual contingency of the principle's existence:

One may then say that the principle as something that is *thought* in reality is factual, and hence contingent. But what is not contingent is the referent of this principle; *viz.*, facticity as such insofar as it is necessary. And it is because this facticity is necessary that the principle, insofar as it is – in fact – proffered and insofar as it will be or will have been thought by some singular entity – no matter when or under what circumstances – it is for this reason that the principle will always be true the moment it is posited or thought. What is contingent is that the principle, as a meaningful statement, is actually thought; but what is not contingent is that it is true insofar as it is – as a matter of fact – thought in a time and place – no matter when or where. Consequently there is no paradox so long as the principle's domain of application is precisely restricted to entities in their being.¹⁷

The crucial operative distinction here is that between the necessity of contingency *qua* referent of thought and the contingency of the (factual) existence of the thought that everything is necessarily contingent. The question then is: How does Meillassoux propose to account for this separation between the contingent existence of thought and the necessary existence of its referent? Clearly, this separation is intended to safeguard the coherence of the principle, as well as the materialist primacy of the real over the ideal, by ensuring a strict differentiation between thought and reality. But given that, for Meillassoux,

17. *Ibid.*

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thought's purchase on reality is guaranteed by intellectual intuition, it follows that it must also be the latter which accounts for this distinction between thought and referent. Accordingly, it would seem that it is in and through the intellectual intuition of absolute contingency that the contingency of the thought is separated from the necessity of its referent. Everything then hinges on how Meillassoux understands the term 'intellectual intuition'.

Clearly, he cannot be using the term in its Kantian acceptance, since, for Kant, intellectual intuition actively create its own object, unlike sensible intuition, which passively receives an independently existing object. According to Kant, only the intuitive understanding of an 'archetypical' intellect (*intellectus archetypus*) unburdened by sensibility – such as God's – possesses this power to produce its object; for our discursive understanding, mediated as it is by sensibility, it is the synthesis of concept and intuition which yields the cognitive relation between thought and its object. Meillassoux clearly rejects Kant's representationalist account of the relation between mind and world, just as he must refuse phenomenology's appeal to an intentional correlation between thought and referent. Yet it is far from evident what plausible theory of intellectual intuition could simultaneously ensure the scission between the contingency of thought and the necessity of its referent – which Meillassoux takes to be sufficient to stave off contradiction – while circumventing representational and intentional correlation as well as abjuring the archetypical intellect's production of its object (since the claim that intellection creates its object is clearly incompatible with any commitment to materialism). Though Meillassoux

insists that the paradox of absolute contingency can be obviated by restricting the principle's domain of reference to 'entities in their being', he does not explain how he proposes to enforce this rigid demarcation between the principle's contingently effectuated *intension* and what he deems to be its 'eternally' necessary *extension*.

'Reference', of course, is intimately related to 'truth', but though Meillassoux claims that the truth of the principle is guaranteed by its ontological referent, this connection is anything but semantically transparent, since the extension of the expression 'absolute contingency' is no more perspicuous than that of the term 'being'. The customary prerequisite for realist conceptions of truth is an extra-theoretical account of the relation between intension and extension, but Meillassoux's attempt to construe the latter in terms of intellectual intuition makes it exceedingly difficult to see how it could ever be anything other than intra-theoretical.¹⁸ Indeed, it is unclear how the referent 'absolute contingency' could ever be rendered intelligible in anything other than a purely conceptual register. Consequently, Meillassoux presents us with a case in which the determination of extension, or 'truth', remains entirely dependent upon a conceptually stipulated intension, or 'sense' – the referent 'absolute contingency' is exclusively determined by the sense of the contingently existing thought 'everything that is, is absolutely contingent'. But if the only way to ensure the separation between the (contingently existing) ideality of meaning and the (necessarily existing) reality of the referent is by

18. Cf. Hilary Putnam, 'The Meaning of "Meaning"' in *Mind, Language, and Reality: Philosophical Papers* Volume 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 236.

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making conceptuality constitutive of objectivity, then the absolutization of the non-correlational referent is won at the price of an absolutization of conceptual sense which violates the materialist requirement that being not be reducible to thought. Far from reconciling rationalism with materialism, the principle of factuality, at least in this version, continues to subordinate extra-conceptual reality to a concept of absolute contingency.

Although Meillassoux's speculative overcoming of correlationism strives to deploy the latter's strongest weapons against it – as we saw with the principle of factuality itself – the distinction between the real and the ideal is part of the correlationist legacy which cannot be mobilized against it without first undergoing decontamination. For correlationism secures the transcendental divide between the real and the ideal only at the cost of turning being into the correlate of thought. Meillassoux is right to insist that it is necessary to pass through correlationism in order to overcome it, and in this regard we should follow his recommendation and find a way of deploying the distinction between real and ideal against correlationism itself. But precisely here a fundamental speculative problem reveals itself, namely: Can we think the diachronic disjunction between real and ideal while obviating any recourse to a transcendental divide between thinking and being?