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# Speculative Justice: Quentin Meillassoux and Politics

By Nathan Coombs

## Article Abstract

One of the reasons for the enthusiastic reception of Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude* is that the book seemingly allows us to disentangle metaphysics from politics. In this article I argue that this interpretation ignores the way in which Meillassoux positions his philosophy of contingency as a normative fusion of values and the real. Drawing on the published fragments of *The Divine Inexistence*, his book *The Number and the Siren* and comments made in interviews, the article pieces together Meillassoux's ambition to combat the collectivist 'historical symbol' of modernity and replace it with an individual, ethical orientation guided by speculative philosophy.

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## Speculative Justice: Quentin Meillassoux and Politics

For no one dares even now to defend philosophy in the full scope of its ambition: the absolute intelligibility of being qua being and the conceptual apprehension of our immortality.

Quentin Meillassoux, 'L'inexistence divine'<sup>1</sup>

The ambition of Quentin Meillassoux's book *After Finitude* to release thought from the correlation between mind and world has led to it becoming a landmark text of the speculative realist movement. In offering a defence of the absoluteness of mathematics unencumbered by considerations of existential finitude, Meillassoux's philosophy has been embraced for breaking free of the overbearing politics associated with many continental thinkers. Furthermore, Meillassoux's most striking philosophical claim – that at any moment gravity could cease to function, a new form of life emerge, or a God rise into being – appeals to speculative realists precisely in its cosmic generality. A certain Marxist element has been identified in *After Finitude's* repetition of Lenin's injunction in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* to think the independence of the world from cognition and in the way he brings to consummation Althusser's desire for a 'materialist, rationalist empiricism.'<sup>2</sup> Yet readings of Meillassoux's work generally stress the arguments for realism and absolute contingency in a speculative-scientific register wary of burdening the text with political commitments.

In this article I do not seek to downplay the cosmic scope of *After Finitude* but argue that the overly scientific reception of Meillassoux's philosophy has obscured its political dimensions.<sup>3</sup> I contend that despite the generally apolitical nature of *After Finitude*, if we look to the published fragments of *The Divine Inexistence*, his book *The Number and the*

*Siren*, and comments made in interviews, the political commitments animating Meillassoux's thought become clearer. These include his opposition to historical teleology, collective political mobilisation, and religious and secular political fanaticism. Most significant in this respect is how *The Divine Inexistence* positions his philosophy as primed to take over from the 'historical symbol' of Hegel and Marx, both of whom he considers responsible for the twentieth century's totalitarian excesses. In recognising philosophy's sole capacity to cognize the absolute, Meillassoux hopes that we will be driven to a more contemplative relationship with the existing order. The fanatical excesses of the past century driven by collective enthusiasm will be replaced with an individualistic desire for justice guided by the insights of speculative philosophy. My claim is that this argument represents an ultimately conservative politics, regarding which Meillassoux's readers, some seeing some an affinity between his philosophy and radical political thought, are possibly unaware. I also aim to show that these conclusions follow from the way Meillassoux endows natural and human history with a structure intelligible only to speculative philosophy. I conclude that this grants Meillassoux a wide scope for making ethical and political prescriptions, which are directed at removing injustice from the sphere of collective, political contestation.

This article proceeds in three sections. Section one argues that Meillassoux's philosophy is principally a response to Marxism's 'historical symbol'. I show that Meillassoux's alternative 'factual symbol' promotes a speculative ethical orientation removing injustice from the sphere of political contestation. In section two, I address his book on the poet Stephan Mallarmé, *The Number and the Siren*. I contend that Meillassoux's notion of 'infinitezation' advanced in this book accords philosophers esoteric privilege, this being broadly in keeping with his programmatic aims in *The Divine Inexistence*. Section three

draws upon these findings to provide an alternative interpretation of *After Finitude*. Rather than seeing the work as animated principally by defending scientific realism, I point to its failure to prove the grasp of mathematics on the real as evidence that the text's motivations lie with shoring up philosophy's claim to think the absolute.

### **6.1 Digging down to the politics, discovering messianic roots**

The English translation of Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude* arrived in 2008, following the inaugural speculative realist workshop held at Goldsmiths College in April, 2007. This event, bringing together Meillassoux with Iain Hamilton Grant, Ray Brassier and Graham Harman, has proved pivotal to the continued reception of his work. Since this time there has, admittedly, been a drifting apart of these thinkers' intellectual trajectories (with a hostile rift forming between Harman and Brassier). Nevertheless, attached to the speculative realist 'movement' in the minds of most, Meillassoux's philosophy continues to be interpreted first and foremost as a defence of scientific realism. This interpretation stresses Meillassoux's argument against neo-Kantian agnosticism regarding the objective world and his defence of mathematics' capacity to gain an absolute hold on objects' primary qualities. Both Meillassoux's admirers and his detractors tend to agree on the scientific interpretation of his work (an interpretation that reaches an apogee in Matt Spencer's argument that *After Finitude* can support climate science).<sup>4</sup> The flip side of the coin is that Meillassoux's philosophy has been treated to scarcely any attention from a political perspective. Since part of the appeal of speculative realism derives from its promise to disentangle metaphysics from the political determinations evident in much continental philosophy, to read politics into Meillassoux's work seems to run counter to the whole spirit of the enterprise. It follows that even where Meillassoux's philosophy has become the

subject of political discussion, as for instance in the disagreement between Peter Hallward and Nathan Brown,<sup>5</sup> this has tended to be at a high level of abstraction concerning whether speculation assists or detracts from concrete political thought.

Only Alberto Toscano has offered a critique addressing the political motivations underlying *After Finitude*, including the book's assault on fideistic agnosticism and religious 'fanaticism'. This Enlightenment redux approach, Toscano claims, harbours suspiciously Christian-centric sympathies, animating the treatise in the "terms of the French lumières, especially of Voltaire." The result is that it is underwritten by a worryingly "conservative thesis that a relativistic proliferation of beliefs, beyond any horizon of legitimacy, is a form of de-Christianization, the obverse of [...an] equally questionable conviction that critical Western rationality is a 'progressive rationalization of Judeo-Christianity under the influence of Greek philosophy.'" <sup>6</sup> These concerns are well placed. Yet Toscano's critique, penned not long after the release of *After Finitude*, does not address the wider body of Meillassoux's work that has since come to light. This includes the publication of fragments of his PhD thesis *The Divine Inexistence* and his book on the poet Stephan Mallarmé, *The Number and the Siren*. Christopher Watkin has addressed the former, but with his focus squarely on the philosophy of religion he does not engage with the political commitments of the text.<sup>7</sup> My claim is that for two reasons these works help us dig down to the political commitments giving shape to Meillassoux's philosophy. First, they broaden out the thematic scope beyond that of *After Finitude*, treating the reader to a greater number of remarks which help position his work within the history of political thought. Second, *The Divine Inexistence*, dating back to the 1990s, has value in allowing us to chart the evolution of Meillassoux's ideas. The text allows us to infer some of the important motivations for his work perhaps less evident in *After Finitude*. Before moving on to a discussion of the content

of *The Divine Inexistence* I begin with some biographical details which contextualise the book's authorship. In doing so, I aim to demonstrate how it is possible to perceive even more clearly the text as a response to Marxist historicism and the philosophical legacy of Hegel.

Meillassoux's intellectual upbringing was immersed in Marxist philosophy. He remarks on his father, Claude Meillassoux (a famous intellectual influential amongst Althusserian anthropologists),<sup>8</sup> that he was "quite a remarkable Marxist, inventive and individualistic (distant from every party, very anti-Stalinist, very anti-Maoist)."<sup>9</sup> It is also worth drawing attention to the anti-historicist current of thought influential in the French post-war intellectual scene: a period in which Levi Strauss's structuralist anthropology, Bachelard and Canguilhem's epistemology of science, and Althusser's reimagining of dialectical materialism through French historical epistemology were all undermining the philosophy of history associated with the Hegel and the German historical school. Although the influence of these authors on Quentin Meillassoux's philosophy remains opaque, it is an important context to bear in mind when considering Meillassoux's remarks that "Hegel, along with Marx, was my only true master: the one on whom I had to depend in order to achieve my own thinking."<sup>10</sup> That Hegel and Marx are not names preponderant in Meillassoux's work should not lead us to underappreciate their influence.

Moving forward to the beginning of Meillassoux's academic career, another important piece of context is the period in which he worked on his doctorate. This was completed in 1997, forming the basis of the endlessly reworked and still unpublished text, *The Divine Inexistence*. Significantly, Meillassoux started to elaborate his distinctive philosophical ideas from the early 1990s, a period marked by a sense of *fin de siècle* after the fall of the Soviet Union and placing the maturation of his ideas broadly synchronous with the publication of



Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*.<sup>11</sup> By his own testimony we know that Meillassoux's formative influences were Hegel, Marx and Alain Badiou's *Being and Event*, and not the deconstructive and poststructuralist canon. Yet the comparison with Derrida is still insightful in that both philosophers capture something of the spirit of the age.<sup>12</sup> For the manner in which Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* offers to hold on to the messianic promise of Marxism in the aftermath of the collapse of communism, attempting to salvage a messianic impulse shorn of any articulation with political and economic forces, is in a number of senses repeated by Meillassoux. Though their normative prescriptions vary greatly, like Derrida, for Meillassoux negating historicist 'metaphysics' goes in hand in hand with ontological speculation about the contingent event. Indeed, the central theme of *The Divine Inexistence* is precisely to examine and respond to the question of how philosophy can relate values to the real in the aftermath of Marxism's failed 'historical symbol'.

The theme of reconciling philosophy and the real, one permeating *After Finitude* only in a more scientific guise, animates explicitly Meillassoux's project in *The Divine Inexistence*. In Meillassoux's words, philosophy "is meaningful only once we have a scientific rupture of the religious link between reality and norms."<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, he sees philosophy's perennial task as sealing the wound opened up by science between value and being, navigating between the poles of the priest who would drag us towards transcendence, and the sophist who, like Thrasymachus, Socrates's antagonist in Plato's *The Republic*, declares justice is only a profitable convention.<sup>14</sup> What Meillassoux calls 'symbolization' is the conjoining of these two spheres: the human value of justice and the cosmic real. The programme of *The Divine Inexistence* is to provide a new philosophical symbolization of the relationship between values and the real in the form of knowledge of the necessity of contingency. To understand why, however, requires introducing a historical vector to the discussion.

Meillassoux argues that the history of symbolization has passed through three stages: the cosmological, the romantic, and the historical. First was the regime of the cosmological symbol where, after the dissolution of myth by early natural philosophy, Plato tried to reconcile value and being by inscribing justice into the eternal Ideas. Second was the birth of the romantic symbol in response to the blow dealt to the cosmological symbol by Newton with his description of planetary orbits in a linear, clockwork motion. Here, with the birth of Enlightenment scepticism, Meillassoux also sees the replacement of the figure of the sophist with his potentially more destructive modern equivalent, so that “this splendid liberation of fanaticism is accompanied once more by a cynicism that renews the habitual categories of despair.”<sup>15</sup> With the romantic symbol – responding to the break between nature and the social of which Rousseau would become the most famous advocate – the natural order is associated with the good, and the social with the corrupt. But this symbolization rapidly breaks down under its own indefensible conception of natural good. Meillassoux draws upon a Hobbesian subtext by arguing that the pity of Rousseau’s noble savage “is no more common in the living than are war, violence and cruelty.”<sup>16</sup> As such, the romantic symbol is but a transitional symbol quickly giving way to the “authentic symbol of modernity”: “the historic Symbol through whose culmination we are still living today.”<sup>17</sup>

For two reasons it is plausible to consider the breakdown of the historical symbol the most important for Meillassoux’s philosophy. First, because it is the last of our inherited symbols: the one Meillassoux sees his own philosophy as replacing in order to recommence the fusion of values and the real. Second, because it is here that the political motivations of his project becomes most evident and his rhetoric most barbed. In his depiction of the historical symbol Meillassoux gives a straightforward representation of historicist Marxism, one essentially interchangeable with Hegel’s philosophy of history. On this reading, the

*“ruse of history”* finds its way through the disorganized jumble of individual actions to secure *“economism”*: an “ultra-objective principle of a teleology of the Good, whether in its liberal or Marxist version.”<sup>18</sup> Perhaps with the likes of Francis Fukuyama in mind, for Meillassoux Marxism and liberalism share the same teleology where “every economic reverse amounts to a transient retreat amidst a larger movement towards a necessarily positive outcome.”<sup>19</sup>

The reduction of Marxism to its historicist variants supports Meillassoux’s cynicism about mass political mobilisation. As he describes its inevitable degradation to political oppression: “The romantic gives way to the Robespierist cult of the supreme Being. The historical is degraded into the dogma of infallibility, whether of the Party or of the Invisible Hand.”<sup>20</sup> Despite also referring to the Smith’s metaphysics of the free market, the real critical force of Meillassoux’s argument is clearly directed at the damage caused by Stalin’s dialectical materialism. This was a philosophy “promoting generalized falsehood in the name of the proletarian Good to come.”<sup>21</sup> In a discussion on ‘Promethean humanism’ such scepticism about political metaphysics converts into a more general argument against the disastrous consequences of political power. In particular, he seeks to overturn young Marx’s humanist critique of religion: “What humans transpose into the religious God is not their own essence, as Feuerbach and the young Marx claimed, but rather their degradation of their own essence. For what humans see in God is the possibility of their own omnipotence: the accomplishment of their inhumanity rather than their humanity.”<sup>22</sup> Humanity having lost its belief in the real movement of history being on the side of emancipation:

Justice deserts being once more, even once we have arrived in the innermost recess of History. We now live the death of the Symbol of modernity, just as the eighteenth century lived the death of the Greek Symbol. The Symbol is lacking once more, and

now as ever we confront the alternative nightmares reborn from the ashes: traditionalism and sophisticated immoralism.<sup>23</sup>

In the wake of the eclipse of the symbol of modernity we are thus faced by the spectre of the religious fanatic and the atheist nihilist. To avoid these equally undesirable figures, Meillassoux's 'factual symbol', centred on avoiding the worst excesses of human violence, aims to replace Marxism's failed historical symbol. However, this new symbolization will not by itself accomplish anything unless it is wedded to anticipation of a new advent, by which Meillassoux means an *ex-nihilo* event inaugurating a new cosmic-scale World of Justice.

Thus, in order to understand the purpose of Meillassoux's new symbol one also has to appreciate its alignment with a periodisation of the previous World-changing advents: those of matter, life and thought. In the case of these advents, no principle, cause, or agent can account for them; their origin is solely the unreasonable hyper-chaos underlying the seeming stability of natural laws. This can be put in contrast to intra-Worldly modifications, which are changes possible within the probabilistic distribution of what already exists in a World. Meillassoux insists that the distinction is necessary in order to show why rebirth would constitute a new World and could not be "an advent internal to the creative activities of humans."<sup>24</sup> The Fourth World of Justice is out of the hands of humans to realise themselves even though the immortality it bestows would provide "the sole life worthy of their [humans'] condition."<sup>25</sup> In order to identify a universal principle of justice Meillassoux fixes on a Hobbesian axiomatic relating all species of injustice to the ethical genus of human mortality. "And of all these injustices the most extreme is still death: absurd death, early death, death inflicted by those unconcerned with equality."<sup>26</sup> The axiomatic of death as the

‘factual’ limit to any intra-Worldly attempt to realise justice imposes a condition which humans, he believes, could never realise themselves through their rational volition.

Let us pause to consider these political prescriptions. Despite the appeal of ‘absurd death’ as the horizon of injustice, especially for a generation sensitive to human rights, it is really the case that death is the genus of all injustice? What about poverty, inequality, exploitation? All these would be more conventional candidates for occupying the category of injustice. Isolating death as the horizon of injustice serves to place justice out of reach of any political movement. Lesser intra-Worldly injustices are thereby eclipsed by the horizon of our present world of injustice. Placing ethical primacy on death, a condition we can only hope will be overcome by a contingent advent, has the effect of allowing humankind to hope for the new World of Justice whilst recognising its own impotence to achieve it. Yet attempting to militate against the fatalism this might seem to imply, Meillassoux also contends that just because we cannot create this change does not mean its anticipation is irrelevant. Quite the contrary, by anticipating the new world of justice he claims that humanity “can be unified by intensively lived values, because they are founded on the active expectation of an ontologically remarkable event that is accessible to every thinking being.”<sup>27</sup> Meillassoux seeks to correct the impression of a prescription for passivity, or of a “lazy fatalism under the pretext that the advent of the world of justice does not depend on the power of humans.”<sup>28</sup> This also indicates where Meillassoux’s speculative ethics provides the clearest signs of how we should act within our existing World. It is to such intra-Worldly ethics which we now turn.

## 6.2 Esotericism: the discreet charm of the philosophers

In order to understand how Meillassoux's world of justice can come into being one needs to distinguish between its contingent advent and the subjectivity that would make it truly a new world. To this end, Meillassoux stresses the necessity of its intra-Worldly anticipation. The new World's novelty resides in our appreciation of it as a novelty, and this can only be accomplished by pre-advental expectation. If such a World change is to take place we need to be able to be surprised by the beauty of the contingent alignment of our desire for concord between our values and the real. Why intra-Worldly action is to go beyond just an "improved *third World*"<sup>29</sup> is explained by reference to the cumulative nature of advents. Meillassoux depicts our present "third World", after the discoveries set out by his own philosophy, as one where "the ultimate has in fact taken place" in which "the contingent being that knows the absoluteness of contingency."<sup>30</sup> Since we have already reached the ultimate qua rational beings, we thus need to maintain the capacity to surprise ourselves with the novelty of the new World when it arrives. How can such surprise be maintained? In *The Divine Inexistence* Meillassoux gives no details of such practices of anticipation. Yet if the realization of justice depends upon our ability to long for uniting our values with the real, and if our values are underwritten by absolute knowledge of contingency, it makes sense that these practices are ones which can, to the greatest extent possible within an intra-Worldly situation, bring subjectivity into line with an ontology of contingency. An idea of what this might involve can be found in Meillassoux's book on Stéphane Mallarmé's poem, *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard* (A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance). As Meillassoux hints, awaiting justice can be compared to "the free act to the throw of the dice"<sup>31</sup> – a throw, perhaps, like the Master of the ship in Mallarmé's poem?

Meillassoux's book, *The Number and the Siren*, aims to show that Mallarmé's poem is coded with a message. What is more, that it is possible to decipher this code in order to

reveal the way its cryptic repetition of 'The Number' stands for a wager that a precise number represents chance itself. Part Two of the book is particularly interesting since he provides a speculative reading of the poem in order to draw out the consequences of what he calls the 'infinitezation' of Mallarmé's encryption. What Meillassoux means by infinitezation is the way the poem is ambiguously coded so to perpetuate chance. The paradox grappled with is as follows: how can a single number, a most finite determination, represent the undecidability of chance? Let us consider an example to demonstrate the difficulty. If one throws the dice, as the Master of the ship in Mallarmé's poem prevaricates about, chance will dictate which number is rolled. But as soon as the resulting number of the throw is revealed – in other words, it is fixed – then it is no longer chance, but the result of chance: chance finitized. Is infinitezation then best represented as a withdrawal from deciding to throwing the dice, suspending the actualisation of the virtual possibilities and preserving all possible results? If so, then a unique number cannot be chance since infinitezation demands that all possible outcomes be preserved. Deadlock?

"The solution," Meillassoux (2012a, 138) speculates, "consists in *displacing the demand that the gesture* [of throwing or not throwing] *be infinite, onto the Number itself*. In other words, to throw the dice, to produce a Number – but a "unique Number" *supporting in itself the virtually contradictory structure of Chance.*"<sup>32</sup> Meillassoux seeks to show how indeterminacy is built into the deployment of a specific number, and how this indeterminacy so deeply traverses Mallarmé's act of encrypting the poem that we cannot even be certain that Mallarmé did in fact code his poem. Although Mallarmé comes close to enumerating his poem with precisely 707 words, Meillassoux claims that he built in enough ambiguity so that we can never be sure if the poem has been encoded. This Meillassoux's interprets as a deliberate act of infinitezation on Mallarmé's part, setting the procedure apart from the

progressive motion of Hegelian and Marxist dialectics. ““Fixing the infinite” is indeed the fundamental programme of Mallarméan poetics, a programme that renders it a stranger to those notions, so valorized by modernity, of “becoming” and “dynamism” ... What is required is to capture a sudden modification, a transfiguration, a fulguration ... a passed movement annulled as soon it is initiated.”<sup>33</sup>

As Meillassoux sees it, Mallarmé created enough ambiguity so that it would never be certain if the poem would be deciphered: the poem being a wager cast to sea like a message in a bottle. Both author and reader are locked into the same uncertainty: an uncertainty “quavering” around a determinate number. “For the code was discovered, and, if we succeed at demonstrating that it is affected by a slight uncertainty, we will have established that Mallarmé’s Number and his gesture have indeed been infinitized in the eyes of his readers.”<sup>34</sup> The notion of infinitization can thus be read as Meillassoux’s first intervention into theorising the subjectivity appropriate to intra-Worldly chance. In the remarkably compressed prose of the conclusion to his book, Meillassoux frames his discussion of Mallarmé as an alternative to modernist views of historical progress, evidencing a fundamental continuity with the normative commitments of *The Divine Inexistence*. Mallarmé’s act allows us to

once more *vectorize* the subject with meaning, with a direction freed from ancient eschatology; all that our masters have instructed us to regard as outmoded *par excellence* – those dead Grand Narratives, at best obsolete when fermented by solitary researchers, at worst criminal when clothed in the statist finery of Progress or Revolution; all this would nevertheless have succeeded in making *one* breakthrough up to our time, one only, and at a precise point – a unique Poem that would traverse



the 20<sup>th</sup> century like a hidden gem, finally to reveal itself, in the following century, as the strangely successful defense of an epoch we had buried under our disenchantments.<sup>35</sup>

Opposed to modernist narratives of historical progress, inevitably giving rise to ‘criminal’ revolutions, Mallarmé alone stands out as a shining example of the type of subject fit for an ontology of contingency. In Mallarmé’s refusal to give away the secrets of his poem easily, forever imprinting it with a mark of undecidability, he became a prophetic subject: one whose ideas speak across the ages from poet to philosopher. For Meillassoux, Mallarmé thus exemplifies the praxis fit for an ontology of absolute contingency. There is, in my opinion, a name for this: esotericism. Against mass mobilisation conjoined to a historical vision that would be rationally contestable and capable of being submitted to empirical verification, Meillassoux’s subject of change, the subject who knows the ultimate, is one who keeps their dice close to their chest and who talks in encoded prose only capable of being deciphered by the finest minds of an age.

In an interview Meillassoux revealingly reflects upon the human losses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and their role in motivating his theories. With the contingency of nature’s laws being “outside the grasp of our action” the positive result of this political impotence is that the

‘eternal possible’ frees me from suffering over the appalling misfortune of those who have experienced atrocious deaths, allows me to escape being paralyzed by an impossible mourning for the atrocities of the twentieth century, and also permits me to invest energy in an egalitarian politics that has become conscious of its limits.

Indeed, politics is delivered from all charges of messianism, since eschatological awaiting is entirely recuperated by individual subjectivity. This partition of tasks (individual messianism, political finitude) allows us to avoid the totalitarian temptation of collective action. We can efficiently expel the eschatological desire from politics only by allowing this desire to be unfolded openly in another sphere of existence (such as private life or philosophy).<sup>36</sup>

What is remarkable here for an author of a text named *After Finitude* and whose intellectual background includes the influence of Badiou's *Being and Event*, where political truths are sustained through an collective, infinite truth procedure, is the desire to impose limits upon political thought, effectively cutting politics down to size and transferring those desires into the realm of individual subjectivity informed by speculative philosophy. If Marx's early innovation can be identified as funnelling the misguided need for spiritual reconciliation of man with his essence into the political movement capable of realising the real conditions for emancipation, Meillassoux's move can be read as a restoration of the ethical orientation of pre-Marxist critical idealism.

### **6.3 After Finitude: in the spirit of the fossil?**

We are now in a position to return to Meillassoux's most famous text, *After Finitude*. As stated in the introduction, the aim was to undermine the overly scientific reading of Meillassoux's philosophy that would grant little credence to a political reading of his work. I believe the preceding sections have gone some way towards fulfilling this ambition. But if I can also demonstrate that the scientific reading fails to account for the argument of *After Finitude*, and show that the text reflects the normative commitments set out in *The Divine*

*Inexistence*, then the scientific reading of his work will be further weakened. To do so, I want to demonstrate that one of oddities of scientific reception of *After Finitude* is that the key argument on which it rests – Meillassoux’s attempt to speculatively secure objects’ primary, mathematical qualities – is never actually resolved. I begin by providing an abridged reading of the text and end by pointing to how it fails in its goal to secure mathematics’ absolute hold on the real. I then reflect on the significance of this failure for the question of how we should interpret Meillassoux’s philosophy.

Meillassoux opens *After Finitude* by presenting its purpose as concerned with making sense of ancestral statements. The question is how can philosophy interpret the meaning of mathematical scientific claims such as ‘the accretion of the earth occurred 4.56 billion years ago’? Although a seemingly obscure topic, Meillassoux imbues it with an unexpected urgency for drawing a line of demarcation between scientific reasoning and the unreason promoted by post-Kantian philosophies. While the ancestral statement poses no mysteries for the spontaneously realist modern scientist, or for the non-creationist general public, Meillassoux claims that for many post-Kantians such statements are deeply paradoxical. Meillassoux’s aim is to show why the commonplace realism of ancestral statements – regarding a world before a thinking conscience existed to cognize it – would be for the line of post-Kantian thought he terms ‘correlationism’, only a statement for us as thinking subjects or else strictly senseless. Owing to the respect for science expected of modern philosophy and the coyness of correlationists in admitting their anti-scientific bias, Meillassoux wants to show why the problem with interpreting ancestral statements holds with cast-iron necessity for philosophies accepting the correlationist imperative of Kant’s critical revolution. Crucially, this demonstration is not made for the purpose of advising a retreat to dogmatic, pre-critical philosophy. Meillassoux seeks to show why only the passage

through “correlationism” can deliver a speculative materialism certain, and able to discourse about, an objective world existing before our species and long after we have passed away.

To prove why no dogmatic or naive realism shores up scientific realism, Meillassoux holds firm to the rupture of Kant’s critical revolution. His intention is to persuade us that, whatever its faults, there is no turning back to pre-critical ignorant bliss. When abjuring metaphysics by establishing science as the primary source of knowledge, Kant made the right choice. But Kant’s peculiar response, involving a recentering of knowledge on the side of the subject contrary to the advances made by Galilean mathematical science, was nothing less than a “catastrophe” inaugurating a “Ptolemaic counter-revolution.”<sup>37</sup> Meillassoux’s speculative materialism therefore has to show the possibility of an alternative path in order to demonstrate why we can neither retreat to dogmatic metaphysics nor rest content with Kantianism without sliding towards the ‘strong correlationism’ of his successors. Meillassoux has to show why, in leaving an inaccessible noumenal realm, the Kantian ‘weak correlationist’ limitation on knowing the real necessarily has to give way to the closed circle of ‘strong correlationism’ (Hegel, Heidegger, Wittgenstein) where world and subject are always co-constitutive. That is, where a world is always a world for-us, sealing off the possibility of a straightforward interpretation of mathematical ancestral statements.

The lynchpin for resolving both criteria is Meillassoux’s isolation of the root of the problem in Kant’s unexamined acceptance of facticity (Heidegger’s term for describing the way the world reveals itself to us through categories of the understanding, seemingly without any rational explanation).<sup>38</sup> Facticity opens the door for absolutizing what Meillassoux calls his anhypothetically derived ‘principle of unreason’ (a principle that cannot

be deduced from any other, but is provable through inconsistencies in all attempts to refute it). The reason why this is possible is because in the face of facticity, and if wishing to hold on to the existence of the in-itself, the Kantian faces two choices. The Kantian either has to absolutize facticity against idealism, or absolutize correlation against realism. Since the decision to absolutize one of the terms is logically impressed upon weak correlationism, post-Kantianism, when choosing the latter option – as in the case with German idealism – has to adopt the pernicious strong variety. As Meillassoux argues, this inevitably transits in the direction of Bishop Berkeley's subjective idealism where to even talk of a thing-in-itself beyond thought becomes a contradiction. The idealist dictum that every X is always a posited X, where thought always returns to itself even whilst trying to escape itself, becomes the logical trajectory of Kant's critical revolution unless one finds another way through the impasse. Meillassoux's imperative is therefore to overturn strong correlationism from within by absolutizing facticity. This is not on the grounds that there is an absolute reason why things are how they are, but because there is absolutely no reason why things are as they are. Once the only option left is to absolutize the principle of unreason, then the hyper-chaos and ever-possible instability of the laws of the universe is revealed to intellectual intuition. The universe of the universe are shown to rest on nothing but reasonless contingency.

Once reaching this point in his text, Meillassoux admits that the menacing force of hyper-chaos he has unleashed seems to have taken the demonstration far from its aim of securing mathematical access to primary qualities. Indeed, it appears that his principle of unreason has undermined the capacity for positive knowledge of the objective world now unsettled by the radical contingency lurking beneath the seeming stability of nature's laws. However, Meillassoux seeks to offset this impression by showing how certain conditions of

positive knowledge can be derived from the principle of unreason. As he maintains, “the whole interest of the thesis lies therein – that to be contingent, an entity (be it a thing, event, law or structure) cannot be just “anything whatsoever”, with no constraints.”<sup>39</sup> Foremost amongst these constraints is the principle of non-contradiction, which Kant assumed but never attempted to derive. In endeavouring to show that a contradictory entity would be a necessary entity, Meillassoux seeks to disqualify contradiction in the real by reference to the principle of unreason – no entity can be necessary, thus no entity can be contradictory – so that they become two sides of the same anhypothetically derived principle. Meillassoux’s absolutization procedure therewith rationally secures the law of non-contradiction by passing it through a speculative conversion rendering all things, and all laws, contingent. Yet if the treatise is to live up to the critique of correlationism, a derivation of the law of non-contradiction is not enough to pass from the Kantian in-itself to the Cartesian in-itself. This requires a proof of the capacity for mathematics to gain a firm grasp upon nature’s objective properties.

Meillassoux’s response to Hume’s problem in chapter four of the book is the closest he gets to an ontological argument securing the mathematical in-itself. Hume’s problem concerns the illusive necessary connection between events, the problem of proving laws of causality. Although Hume was to abandon the search and switch the focus of the question to human habitual patterns, others have sought to address the problem through probabilistic reasoning. These attempts, Meillassoux argues, all revolve around variations of the same assumption: given the totality of all possible conceivable events and the sum total of events that take place in accordance with physical laws, is it not improbable that laws would not change regularly if there were no underlying reason for their apparent constancy? Drawing upon the Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory axioms, Meillassoux seeks to

show how these probabilistic arguments all rely on an idea, problematised since Georg Cantor, of forming such a totality of possibilities. And if we concede that the transfinite forecloses the formation of a countable totality due to the uncountable chasms between the transfinite cardinals, then the whole idea of a probabilistic resolution to Hume's problem loses its credibility.

Still, Meillassoux concedes that this only takes us as far as an ontological hypothesis. The interesting thing is that as close as Meillassoux gets to pulling together the threads, he falls short in his final attempt to tie his anhypothetical derivation of the principle of unreason with the Cantorian transfinite. The transfer from an ontological proof of the law of non-contradiction to an ontological proof of mathematics' grip on primary qualities is left incomplete: the Kantian in-itself is not traversed to the Cartesian in-itself. In his more recent work on the subject, investigating the connection between the meaningless signs of mathematics, Meillassoux concedes that "we have not at all shown that the empty sign allows ... the description of a world independent of thought."<sup>40</sup> *After Finitude* therefore leaves unresolved two absolutisations necessary for securing the realist truth of the ancestral statement: the first being mathematics in general; the second being the Cantorian transfinite qua the ontological "structure of the possible as such."<sup>41</sup> Given this failure, let us recall that this proof was necessary to give sense to the 'ancestral statement'. Only in reference to Meillassoux's critique of correlationism's inability to grant the full realist sense of the statement, has he made a splash as a scientific realist in a continental tradition frequently harbouring suspicions of an objective 'outside'. Consequently, the overly scientific reading of Meillassoux's work runs aground on Meillassoux's conspicuous lack of proof for the point which would secure his reputation as a stalwart of scientific realism. What is worse for our scientific reader, by the close of the book we discover that "our goal

here was not to tackle this resolution as such.”<sup>42</sup> The focus of the task lies not so much with securing scientific realism, but instead by the imperative to “reconcile thought and [the] absolute.”<sup>43</sup> Combatting the correlationist scourge is a justification for the task, not its goal. The book’s goal is nothing less than elaborating the factual symbol presented in *The Divine Inexistence*.

Meillassoux’s normative commitment to fusing values and the real is most evident in chapter two on ‘Metaphysics, Fideism, Speculation’. Here he addresses the importance of his challenge for undermining what he calls the sceptical-fideist alliance. By this he means to implicate trends within philosophy with the revival of religion in the late twentieth century. As Meillassoux sees it, the critique of metaphysics, presumed for so long to be complementary with the critique of religion, has resulted in a pyrrhic victory. By conflating the critique of metaphysics with a solemn censorship on thinking absolutes all philosophy has succeeded in doing is enjoining a suspicion of rational absolutes. Philosophy has acted as a handmaiden for religious obscurantism by affirming that there is no sense in attempting to ground the absolute in reason. Interestingly, however, Meillassoux does not use this move to conduct a classical rationalist critique of religious faith, but to criticise the specifically de-Christianising tendencies this gives rise to, positioning his intellectual battle against the obscurantist fanatic doling out the “worst forms of violence.”<sup>44</sup> He thus seeks to defend the rational kernel of Christian theology from assaillment by scepticism to the point where the contemporary philosopher is rendered a sad “liberal servant of any theology whatsoever.”<sup>45</sup> This is because abjuring reason’s role in adjudicating on the validity of absolutes “establishes how any piety whatsoever enjoys an equal and exclusive right to grasp the ultimate truth.”<sup>46</sup> According to Meillassoux, the inevitable consequence of the particular conjunction of modern, secular thought with philosophical correlationism is that



“the modern man is he who has been re-ligionized precisely to the extent that he has been de-Christianized.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, the critique of the de-absolutization of thought ‘goes beyond that of the legitimation of ancestral statements. What is urgently required, in effect, is that we re-think what could be called “the prejudices of critical sense’; viz., critical potency is not necessarily on the side of those who would undermine the validity of absolute truths, but rather on the side of those who would succeed in criticizing both ideological dogmatism and sceptical fanaticism.”<sup>48</sup>

My contention is that these remarks provide the essential subtext to *After Finitude*. They are not merely ad hoc ideological justifications grafted on to the scientific core of the text; they are consistent with the normative commitments set out in *The Divine Inexistence*. These commitments stipulate the necessity of fusing values with the real, for which speculative philosophy can stake an exclusive claim. Decades have now passed since combatting Marxist revolutionary movements has seemed an urgent task. For this reason, the political force of Meillassoux’s argument in *After Finitude* has seemingly shifted to the resurgence of religious fanaticism. Nevertheless, my claim is that the same commitments underlie the battle waged against both targets. This is a battle to restore to speculative philosophy to its guiding role, and to direct discontent towards individual ethical introspection, removing the pursuit of justice from the realm of political contestation. Whichever way one looks at it this represents a conservative politics. It is consistent, at best, with a mild reformist politics; one which refracts politics through individualist ethical subjectivity. At worst, it is consistent with a form of idealist authoritarianism issuing arbitrary directives from on high. In any event, it takes us a long way from any politics that could legitimately be termed materialism. It should force us to reappraise whether Meillassoux’s philosophy is compatible with radical thought and indeed whether the

scientific reading of his work does not unconsciously recapitulate some of the conservative themes which have animated his ideas from the start.

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the conservative political dimension of Quentin Meillassoux's philosophy. For Meillassoux, the problems of the twentieth century reflect misguided historicist convictions that have driven collective political projects. He sees his argument for the necessity of contingency as providing a new 'factual symbol' suited for replacing the historical teleology and collective political enthusiasms associated with modernity. His philosophy aims to provide a way to cut politics down to size by promoting an ethical turn where reflection on injustice can be unfolded in the sphere of private life. Fanaticism, both religious and secular, should be replaced by contemplation. Graham Harman (2011, 153–154) asks us to imagine "the absolute triumph of the philosophy of Quentin Meillassoux by the year 2050," a world where, "[a] survey done of *Le Monde* in a feature on Meillassoux reveals that 80 percent of European academics now literally hope for the rebirth of humans who have died atrocious deaths."<sup>49</sup> Is this a world really worth anticipating? Or are there, perhaps, more pressing concerns to which our attention should be directed?

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, "Excerpts from L'inexistence Divine," in *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*, by Graham Harman, translated by Graham Harman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 182.

<sup>2</sup> See Nathan Brown, "Rationalist Empiricism/Dialectical Materialism: From Althusser to Meillassoux," Middlesex University, London (2009).

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Stephen Squibb, "Aleatory Critique: On the Materialist Genre," in *French Theory Today: An Introduction to Possible Futures*, ed. Alexander Galloway (New York: TPSNY/Erudio Editions, 2010). <http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/FTT/French-Theory-Today.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Matt Spencer, "Doing Science Justice: Speculative Materialism and the Facticity of Research," *Symploke* 21, no. 1 (2013), 163–77.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Hallward, "Anything Is Possible: A Reading of Quentin Meillassoux's After Finitude," in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Nick Srnicek, Graham Harman, and Levi Bryant (Melbourne: Re.press, 2011), 130–41; Nathan Brown, "The Speculative and the Specific: On Hallward and Meillassoux," in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Nick Srnicek, Graham Harman, and Levi Bryant (Melbourne: Re.press, 2011), 142–63.

<sup>6</sup> Albert Toscano, "Against Speculation, Or, a Critique of the Critique of Critique: A Remark on Quentin Meillassoux's After Finitude (After Colletti)," in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Nick Srnicek, Graham Harman, and Levi Bryant (Melbourne: Re.press, 2011), 86.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Watkin, *Difficult Atheism: Post-Theological Thinking in Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy and Quentin Meillassoux* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 132–168.

<sup>8</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s a number of scholars – Emmanuel Terray, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch and Pierre Pilippe Rey – attempted to synthesize the work of Althusser with the insights of Claude Meillassoux's ethnography by focusing on the idea of a 'mode of production'. This concerned thinking how 'traditional economies' are synthesized with the capitalist economy to form a complex articulation of modes of production. The 'Meillassoux seminar', as it was known, ran for a decade from 1969 and was known as a lively cross-disciplinary forum for exchange of scientific and political views. See Mahir Saul, "Claude Meillassoux (1925-2005)," *American Anthropologist* 107, no. 4 (2005), 753–57 and Bernard Schlemmer, "A Tribute to Claude Meillassoux," *Review of African Political Economy* 32, no. 103 (2005), 197–201.

<sup>9</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, "Interview with Quentin Meillassoux," in *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*, by Harman Graham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 160.

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<sup>10</sup> Meillassoux, "Interview with Quentin Meillassoux," 168.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Toscano writes that though "few philosophical positions are ever readily reducible to the status of symptoms, it would also be naïve to disregard the link between the recent period of capitalist restoration and the emergence of concern with the messianic and the event." (Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (London and New York: Verso, 2010), 24)

<sup>13</sup> Meillassoux, "Excerpts from L'inexistence Divine," 198.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 216

<sup>32</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé's Coup de Des*. Translated by Robin Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012), 138.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 221-222.

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<sup>36</sup> Meillassoux, "Interview with Quentin Meillassoux," 163.

<sup>37</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*. Translated by Ray Brassier (London and New York: Continuum 2008), 118-120.

<sup>38</sup> Astute readers will recognize this as the crux of Meillassoux's entire argument. His anhypothetical derivation, converting epistemological limit into ontological absolute, is Meillassoux speculative *coup de théâtre*. Catren, in an incisive critique of Meillassoux's solution of absolutizing facticity, takes issue with Meillassoux *a priori* assumption that we cannot discover any rational necessity of physical laws (this precisely being the task of speculative physics), accusing him of fomenting confusion between epistemological criticism and ontological idealism. The result is that far from "defending science from the Ptolemaic counter-revolution that Meillassoux describes so admirably, this narcissitic absolutisation of an inexistent limitation bolsters a certain form of contempt for scientific rationality." (Gabriel Catren, "A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish the Copernican Revolution," *Collapse*, no. V (2012), 466).

<sup>39</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, "Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign." Translated by Robin Mackay (2012), 10.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>41</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 127.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>49</sup> Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 153-154.