

## Meillassoux's Speculative Politics: Time and the Divinity to Come

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It is axiomatic for much of what passes under the strange banner of “Continental philosophy of religion” that the religious must pass through—in a manner reminiscent of the camel and the eye of a needle—Heidegger’s critique of onto-theology, that is, the thinking of God as pure actuality, the highest being among beings, etc. Caputo’s religion without religion, Kearney’s God of the possible, and Levinas’s Other of the Other, for example, at least take on implicitly the call not to think time and therefore God from the viewpoint of eternity. This thinking gives us a different “Continental ethics,” one anchored in a thinking of the Other, of a relation of the finite to the infinite (and not the eternal, though the two are often, wrongly, conflated). This provides a rather broad sweep, but at the least Continental philosophies of religion (or without religion, as the case may be) attempt to counter the implicit *affect* of Heidegger’s analysis in *Being and Time*, namely, that there is a link between thinking time on the basis of the eternal now (the *nunc stans* of the Scholastics) and our fleeing (*fliehen*) from the fact of our finitude, our being-towards-death.<sup>1</sup> However tenuous this connection, there is no denying a certain thinking of finitude that links all of these discourses. In what follows, I am taking a different direction, confronting Quentin Meillassoux’s “divine inexistence,” which demonstrates, in spite of itself, all that these philosophers of religion have been confronting since Heidegger. Meillassoux’s “speculative materialism” has in a short time gained quite a following, but it is my contention that his messianism is one that, while not ontotheological in the most limited sense (his God is not a necessary being) and while having a vague resemblance to Kearney’s work (on the possible God), repeats problematic assumptions of time and eternity that would absolve us of the pains and sufferings of finitude. It is also my contention that, while this aspect of his work—on divine inexistence—is the least known of Meillassoux’s project, it is the *telos* of his metaphysics, since it is an effort to provide a thinking that would deliver us from the Fall.

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<sup>1</sup> There is an analogous move in Derrida’s rendering of the metaphysics of presence throughout his work. For example, see his depiction of Husserl’s account of language as denying “a relationship with death” in *Speech and Phenomena* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press), 54.

I will proceed in three stages. First, I will all too quickly describe Meillassoux's argument about the supposed correlationism of philosophies after Kant, which forms the critical aspect of his project in *After Finitude* (2006). I will then discuss how he moves from what he dubs the correlational circle, where he argues that the correlationist must take the absolute (that is, the correlation) to be both absolute and contingent. This leads Meillassoux to his view that the real is nothing but a hyper-chaos underlying the appearances around us, which he believes has created three worlds of which we are aware: matter, life, and thought. These worlds, it should be said, are irreducible to one another: from one to another is, for Meillassoux, a creation *ex nihilo*, since the effect (say, thought) cannot be preceded by the cause (various agglomerations of life without thought). However my main interest is in the politics he has announced in recent works, one that is subtended by

a Richard Kearney-esque "possible God," which is a fourth world *to come*. Basically, Meillassoux argues that if literally anything is possible, since the world as we know it is subtended by the chaos of *über*-possibilities, then we cannot *a priori* discount the appearance of a future God. Yes, there is no God, *now*, since he'll argue there is no necessary being, but it doesn't mean for him that God may not *be*. As we will see, after the philosophies of finitude of the twentieth century, Meillassoux argues not just that we can *know* the absolute—thus betraying the Kantian notion of finitude—but also that a future immortality of human beings must be hoped for if we are ever to hold to a thinking of justice. We would thus have a hope of being *after finitude* in the everyday sense of the term.

Meillassoux opens *After Finitude* (2006) by arguing that, at least since Kant, philosophy has been caught in the problem of "correlationism,"<sup>2</sup> that is, where we think being as "for us." Here's how he puts it:

Correlationism takes many forms, but particularly those of transcendental philosophy, the varieties of phenomenology, and post-modernism. But although these currents are all extraordinarily varied in themselves, they all share, according to me, a more or less explicit decision: that there are no objects, no events, no laws, no beings which are not always-already correlated with a point of view, with a subjective access. Anyone maintaining the contrary, i.e., that it is possible to attain something like a reality in itself, existing absolutely independently of his viewpoint, or his categories, or his epoch, or his culture, or his language, etc.—this person would be exemplarily naïve.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> We'd be remiss if we didn't mention other excellent accounts of Meillassoux's depiction of correlationism, namely in Paul J. Ennis, *Continental Realism* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011), and Graham Harman's *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Meillassoux, "Time without Becoming," lecture at Middlesex University, London, May 8, 2008. Accessed at <http://speculativeheresy.wordpress.com/resources/>, Dec. 1, 2012, p. 1.

Hence these philosophies, Meillassoux argues, think that the “world is meaningful” only inasmuch as it is “given-to-a-living (or thinking)-being.”<sup>4</sup> “Correlationism,” as such, “consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realm of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another.”<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that these philosophers he critiques do not take the “correlation” or ideas *to be real*, a point that Meillassoux will take to be the center of his own move from correlationism. The correlationist, according to Meillassoux, simply rules out of bounds any discussion of “reality” *as it is* outside of human access. We will have to move quickly past this pastiche of two-hundred years of philosophy, but we can, in the spirit of generosity, recognize, at least in certain thinkers, that we can only ever work out the ways in which our “access” subtends a pre-critical depiction of the real. As Markus Gabriel argues well, though from a very different direction, this was the locus of much discussion for German idealism, and we can certainly think of recent philosophers who have replaced the Kantian architectonic with the filters of discourse or cultural practices, etc.

These philosophers—which, again Meillassoux argues, includes just about all post-Kantian philosophers, including those in Continental philosophy of religion<sup>6</sup>—accordingly proscribe any knowledge of the in-itself, since, for example in Kant, the categories of the understanding cannot be applied beyond intuition in transcendental philosophy. However, we can *think* the noumenal in that we can know *a priori* that the in-itself not only exists but is non-contradictory. Now, for an extra step, which we’ll mention because it is crucial to Meillassoux: the reality of the correlation of the subject with its objects is, on Meillassoux’s account, *contingent* and cannot be necessary: it did not have to be the case that human beings would ever arise to have things-in-themselves appear to us.

This brings us to *After Finitude*’s subtitle: the “necessity of contingency.” Speculative materialism takes its first steps beyond correlationism by arguing that the latter’s position (that we cannot know the necessity of any being, including ourselves) comes about not because it is unknowable, but because “we know,” as Ray Brassier puts it, “that only contingency necessarily exists.”<sup>7</sup> Now Meillassoux may be right that through this we have “‘touched upon’ nothing less than an absolute, the *only veritable one*,” namely, that this relation is what he will call “factual.”<sup>8</sup> But Meillassoux inflates *this* contingency, this literal contingency or “touching” of the real, with Being as such. We see this in *After Finitude*, where on one page he provides the quotation above concerning the contingent. He then discusses how this defeats idealism (the relation is not necessary), and then argues that the correlationist must either (a) deny the facticity of the relation (and become

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<sup>4</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it is a notable claim in *After Finitude* that it is precisely Continental forms of correlationism that give rise to new deisms, since, by supposedly blocking off a thought of the absolute, our hermeneutic and deconstructionist forebears left a void through which latter-day deists placed God.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

an idealist) or (b) go through “absolutizing facticity.”<sup>9</sup> While this may all be true, we might wonder what it is that gives him the ability to say, just sentences and the next page after this, that “we do not maintain that a determinate entity exists, but that it is absolutely necessary that *every entity* might not exist.”<sup>10</sup> If there is no necessary being, this does not mean that all things are as absolutely contingent as the relation of subject and world. Meillassoux provides no warrant for moving from “*the only veritable*” absolute (note the singular) to “*everything*” (note the universal) from one page to the next, even if we take this absolute contingency to be part of what “*everything*” would be. In other words, as far as we can tell, he only proves what the correlationist has already known: that thinking did not need to be and that, yes, it is absolutely true. This only changes things if one depicts the correlationists as denying all reality as such, which probably was not the case. But we will ourselves have to turn the page to keep following his argument.

The “necessity of contingency” is what Meillassoux dubs “factiality”<sup>11</sup>: the fact of the contingency of everything. This is not merely about our facticity as thrown beings in a contingent world where we can never know the future. Nor does it concern the fact that, given the laws of nature, many physical types of being, including our own bodies, may come to be and just as haphazardly pass away. The difference is crucial: Meillassoux is ultimately saying not just that our universe provides us with a number of possible conditions, which he believes that the Cantorean set theory makes impossible in terms of the “transfinite,” but that the universe itself can change at any time, which is what he calls its “factiality” or the “virtual”: it is not, as we shall see, a set of possibilities, but a hyper-chaos in which *virtually* anything is always possible. The chaotic, then, is not one possible out of a whole, but using set theory, there is no All or One-All, Meillassoux argues, thus the “hyper-chaos” where we could never possibly total up all the possibilities.

This fact of absolute contingency is at once minimal and breathtaking: we know that “everything can be otherwise.” Here we have Meillassoux’s *absolute*, which is not a thing, which would be a necessary substance (e.g., God) from which all else derives its being. Rather, the only “eternal principle” is the factuality of contingency.<sup>12</sup> Following Meillassoux this far, we come upon three major consequences of his thought: 1) there is no necessary being (here, we have, in sum, his proof for the inexistence of any God); 2) the in-itself is freed, because of its eternal contingency, from the principle of sufficient reason, since no cause can be said to have a particular effect, a point covered in the next section; 3) the in-itself, as Kant argued, is non-contradictory, since any entity that is already otherwise would always be what it is, and thus non-changeable and hence non-contingent.<sup>13</sup> He then has flipped Hegel on his head: the real, as such, is not rational, that is, there is no principle of sufficient reason behind it.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> See Ray Brassier’s translators note in *After Finitude* (132, n6).

<sup>12</sup> *After Finitude*, 66.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 67-8.

Another way to state the latter is that for Meillassoux, there can be, from one moment to the next, creation *ex nihilo*. Thus, for Meillassoux, there is *no necessary being*, yet there is a *hyper-chaos* that is “eternal” and beyond the dictates of physical time: “Time is not governed by the physical laws because it is the law themselves which are governed by a mad time.”<sup>14</sup> For Meillassoux, then, this is a “time without becoming,” as he puts it, since it is what both creates the possibility of (physical) time and can make time or the flow of becoming stop. This is why, despite his view of hyper-chaos, Meillassoux does not depict being as an inexorable process of becoming, since “the hyper-chaotic time is able to create and destroy even becoming, producing without reason fixidity or movement.”<sup>15</sup> The mathematical intuition, as he himself calls it, that Meillassoux utilizes is precisely a form of *logos qua ratio* to describe the movement from hyper-chaos to the created. Secondly, while Meillassoux has taken on the term “speculative *materialism*”<sup>16</sup> for his project, we will see that Meillassoux is clear that matter was *created ex nihilo*, and thus would always be secondary to a non-material “non-corporeal,” we could say Time before time of this materiality founded in set theory. However, Meillassoux could argue that hyper-chaos, as non-grounded, as non-necessary, provides an “anarchic” principle unrecognizable to the period of onto-theology: “If laws themselves are temporal, then the advent of what *is* ultimately obeys no law— no *arché* where it would already be present before its advent.”<sup>17</sup> And thus, he could argue, his principle of divine *inexistence* is, to paraphrase the most clichéd of Frost poems, the road not *yet* travelled by philosophy, and this will make all the difference. That is, if there is no necessary being, then there is *nothing* subtending the world. And his rejection of the principle of sufficient reason means that he has arrived at what he calls an “irreligious” conception of creation, not just of the world, but of events taking place within *this* world: “Advent [*surgissement*] *ex nihilo* thus presents itself as the concept *par excellence* of a world without God, and for that very reason it allows us to produce *an irreligious notion of the origin of pure novelty*.”<sup>18</sup>

Now, if there is nothing subtending the world and, indeed, there is no meta-universe that provides the laws for what happens *in this universe* (except the mighty hyper-chaos), that is, if there are no external “laws” that tells us why *this* universe was created, Meillassoux pushes us still further: this hyper-chaos, indeed, has *already* intervened in this world.

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<sup>14</sup> “Time without Becoming,” 11.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, “Time without Becoming,” 6; *After Finitude*, 121.

<sup>17</sup> “Appendix: Excerpts from *L’Inexistence divine*,” in *Philosophy in the Making*, 176. As Graham Harman notes, *L’Inexistence divine* was originally the title of his doctoral thesis published in 1997. The “Appendix” includes approximately twenty percent of the total volume, selected and translated by Harman, of a 2003 version of the text. As we’ll see, many of these ideas are also found in a 2010 text, so there’s no reason to think Meillassoux has abandoned these ideas given the publication of *After Finitude* in the meantime. See “The Immanence of the World Beyond,” *The Grandeur of Reason*, eds. Conor Cunningham and Peter M. Candler.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

Meillassoux provides an account of three Worlds arising *ex nihilo* out of the world of chaos. Let's discuss each of these in turn, before turning to the possible God and the immortality that is the true *telos* of his work.

## 1. Matter

Meillassoux has puzzlingly little to say about the appearance of this first World, as he calls it, namely, the World of matter, out of the world of chaos. Here is where he mentions, however, that this World was one clearly not presaged by a previous World:

[L]aws have no reason to be constant, and nothing entails that they will not contain new constants in the future. Such cases of advent [*surgissement*] . . . can be divided into three [Worlds] that mark the essential ruptures of becoming: *matter*, *life*, and *thought*. [We will see that the fourth one is the world of justice, which has yet to come.] Each of these three *appears* [my emphasis] as a Universe that cannot be *qualitatively* reduced to *anything* [my emphasis] that preceded it.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, it is clear for him that matter—in a manner analogical to the big bang physical theories—“appeared” not from proto-matter, as in the view of Divine *Logos* of Philo, but was created out of *nothing*, that is, out of non-materiality via the eternal chaos he describes.

## 2. Life

Meillassoux's argument is complex on this point—basically that qualitative leaps cannot be explained by gathering more quantitative evidence—but his method is *not* to delve into the scientific literature, which is quite vast, on how it was that *organic* creatures appeared out of the inorganic matter that first made up this world. I mention this since his tone is to chastise his predecessors for ignoring all matter of scientific theory, but this merely hides a dodge. Meillassoux is clear that life could not be presaged by the causal relations of the World of matter, but rather is a qualitative leap irreducible to materiality.

As long as reason is identified with thinking the constancy of laws, it remains impossible to think rationally about the advent of life in matter, because it cannot be under[stood] how the lifeless can produce a qualitative multiplicity of affects and perceptions from a certain “molecular geometry.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 294; “Excerpts from *L'inexistence divine*,” 187.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 189.

This advent happened from a “universe of cases that were *in no way* contained in the universe previously.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, against those materialists who argue that, in fact, matter provides the necessary and sufficient conditions for the creation of the organic, Meillassoux argues: “The configurations of life would break the laws of chance, because they would not at all be the possible cases *of* matter, but rather the correlate *within* matter of the appearance *ex nihilo* of vital contents.”<sup>22</sup> However, abiogenesis, that is, the production of life out of the original matter pervading the Earth some 3.5 billion years ago, is not something that simply happened *then*, in the ancestral, as we might say, to use his term, but has been reproduced in laboratories going back to the Miller–Urey experiments in the early 1950s; thus there would seem to be room for robust scientific explanations for the rise of organic from inorganic matter that does not necessitate a thinking of creation *ex nihilo*. I say this not to make science the arbiter of philosophical truths, but only to question this religious, not irreligious, concept of the *ex nihilo*. Now, it could be that Meillassoux could say that, yes, *after the ex nihilo* event some billions of years ago, the laws of this World *now* make such lab experiments possible. Indeed, he seems to be making just this claim:

[T]his vital multiplicity [i.e., life] *is added to* (and *inserted into*) the matter-Universe, *retroactively* [my emphasis] modifying the latter by its advent [*surgissement*] in the midst of it. For the advent of life is not the necessary effect of a material configuration (such claims *have never made sense* [my emphasis]). Instead, it is the contingent and conjoint creation of a Universe of qualities *and* material conditions that were both in-existent until then.<sup>23</sup>

Meillassoux could be said to be joining common cause with the very theologians he chastises, who make precisely these kinds of arguments to undercut materialist approaches in order to make room for the Divine.<sup>24</sup> Instead of a God, though, he argues that what we have is the “contingent advent of a law” providing for life “without there being a law for the advent of laws,” i.e., regularized procedures for foreseeing when this creation *ex nihilo* is to occur.

### 3. Thought

Here Meillassoux touches on another of the most written-about topics in recent philosophy: how did consciousness or thought *appear* out of what was seemingly non-conscious materiality? That is, how did “the radical excess” that is “the travails of life or consciousness” appear?<sup>25</sup> Again, he seems to describe scientists and those

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>24</sup> “This essential excess of life and thought beyond matter implies a scission that ruptures all continuity, leaving the divine and the soul to fill the resulting chasm” (Ibid., 180).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

correlational philosophers he has superceded as uninterested in the problem; perhaps he is just lead to sidestep all scientific assertions on the matter as besides the point.

With the *fourth* World—the World of justice—laid out in some detail by Meillassoux, he is on steadier ground, strangely enough, because while the previous Worlds of life and thought could arguably be explained by the intra-worldly forces, there is simply no physical force that could give rise to the Future God he argues for; there is no way to get from our vast, if finite universe, to an omniscient, omnipotent, infinite God on his account. We have seen that Meillassoux has already argued that *there is no God*, but his fourth World requires, out of the world, a creation *ex nihilo* of a future God, or, as he puts it, a “God who may be” who answers human being’s greatest aspirations.

This “god who may be,” as Meillassoux puts it, is also the title of Richard Kearney’s 2001 book. In that work, Kearney is interested in thinking neither a God that *is* nor a God that *isn’t*, since both define God onto-theologically, that is, as a Being that subtends all of being, on the model of just one substance among others, which Kearney calls a “tendency to reify God by reducing Him to a being—albeit the highest, first, and most indeterminate of all beings.”<sup>26</sup> Kearney, like Meillassoux, does not believe that God is a *necessary* being. If this were the case, he argues, it would come at the cost of thinking of God as unfree. Yet He would also be responsible for all the evil in the World, since He would be the transcendental cause of all that is—the good, the bad, and the ugly. Kearney proposes against this “ontological” rendering of God a hermeneutic eschatology that thinks God not as what *is*, but as a promise *for us*. Put otherwise, God is revealed as a promise, as a “God who may be,” and therefore—we will see the ultimate correlationist move here—is revealed to be not “an essence *in se* [in itself], but as an “I-Self *for us*.”<sup>27</sup> Again, God neither *is* nor *isn’t*, but is the radical “perhaps” to come. Yet we can already begin to see the dividing line from Meillassoux’s “God who may be,” which certainly will rely less on a hermeneutics of Biblical interpretation, since Meillassoux’s thinking is the result of speculation on the pure contingency of being. Nevertheless, in line with Kearney’s approach, what drives Meillassoux’s “eschatological” speculation is very much ethical and political. But Meillassoux is no atheist, since he thinks the metaphysical tradition has given us a false choice, using words that mirror Kearney’s claims in *The God Who May Be*: “either God exists, or God doesn’t” forecloses thinking that “God is possible... that God can really come into being in the future.”<sup>28</sup> This is not based on a particular Biblical passage, as in Kearney’s correlational view of God’s place in *our* history, but through a deduction from Meillassoux’s speculative pivot: if the correlationist must admit the absolute fact of the contingency of the relation, then the real is *absolutely* contingent, i.e., factual or virtual. In this way, *nothing* can be ruled out of bounds; the only impossibility is that there could be a contradictory or a necessary being. But everything is possible, there’s nothing to rule out, even the event of a future God.

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<sup>26</sup> Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 24.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 29, my emphasis.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 459.

For Meillassoux, there remains an eternal hope for “an essentially uncontrollable event—for a man and for a God—which cannot be rendered improbable.”<sup>29</sup> Out of the world of the virtual or the superchaotic may indeed arrive a fourth World beyond matter, life, and thought: “For only this [W]orld<sup>30</sup> could introduce into the future an irreducibility and a novelty as radical as that of life in relationship to matter, or thought in relationship to life,” or indeed the matter from whatever existed before it.<sup>31</sup>

This fourth World he dubs “justice,” and thus he gives us an eschatology in which, created *ex nihilo*, the God once promised in Exodus will mark our own exodus from our enslavement to tyranny and death in this World. Indeed, he thinks not only does this idea of the possible God mark a future of a just world, but gives us a view that should have effects in *this* one.

Our intention then is to make the fourth [W]orld a possibility which can enhance, *in our own world*, the subjectivity of human beings living in our day by profoundly transforming the private lives of those who take seriously such a hypothesis. . . . I think that the *most important for philosophy—its final challenge—is not being, but “may-be [peut-être].”* For the may-be unites within itself the true heart of every ontology (the absoluteness of factual possibility) and the deepest aspirations of ethics (the universal fulfillment of justice).<sup>32</sup>

What this should produce is not just a “theoretical” consideration of this virtual God, but a “dense possibility,” that is, one that has effects on one’s actions in the here-and-now.<sup>33</sup> This is the outcome of what he calls the spectral dilemma. “We must revive the extreme hope of eschatology,” Meillassoux writes, “in order to act—and right away—in view of an unconditional equality for all people, whose ultimate realization no longer depends *on us* [my emphasis] but on an omnipotent God who guarantees ‘the soundness of our folly.’”<sup>34</sup> For Meillassoux, the atheism/theism debate presents not just a false choice ontologically but introduces a “spectral dilemma,” which is, in some sense, an eschatological version of the need to believe.

On the one hand, the theist, in her better moments, does not wish for immortality for her own sake, he argues, but rather for the sake of the other whose loss we cannot begin to countenance. A belief in God is necessary, not to give her life meaning as such, but to countenance the redemption of humanity after all the horrors of our history. For this reason, Meillassoux presents us with the “essential spectre,” whose death deepens us “into a destructive, because obsessive, memory of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> In this essay, Meillassoux does not stick to his previous capitalization of World to differentiate it from the “world” of the virtual or factual. For continuity and less confusion for the reader, I will adjust the quotations from this essay to keep it in line with these important distinctions.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 462.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 463.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 454.

the disappeared.”<sup>35</sup> The essential spectre, he writes, cannot be properly mourned since it results from a “death that bears no meaning, no completion, no fulfillment: just an atrocious interruption of life, such that it would be simply obscene to think that it was not experienced as such by those who suffered it.”<sup>36</sup>

There is no getting around the central affective role death and immortality play in Meillassoux’s work, from his argument from death in *After Finitude*, which I have skipped over, to his assertion that the only proper response to this finitude is an “essential grief,” which “would mean to live with essential spectres, and *no longer die with them* [my emphasis].”<sup>37</sup> The dividing line is unclear concerning essential and non-essential spectres—but it is clear we should pause for a moment to think through the relation to death Meillassoux is espousing, not least his view that lives interrupted in such ways would need a “completion” or “fulfillment.”<sup>38</sup>

In essence, he is arguing that the “work of mourning” for essential spectres— he lists the deaths of children and those who died in mass slaughters—is but a “morbid” dying *with* the dead, and his task is to put an end to the work of mourning through an eschatology that would end the despair caused by these spectres.

How can we accept the appalling injustice done to some, which renders impossible a grief capable of making sense of our relation to the departed? The problem of immortality should not be conceived in terms of personal salvation, but in terms of collective justice, of possible reparation of an extreme wrong. . . . I do know that some lives are entitled to begin again so as to overcome the atrocious end inflicted upon them.<sup>39</sup>

For Freud, the “work of mourning” meant the effort to evince a “libidinal withdrawal” or displacement from one object to another, which would mark a “successful mourning.” Without this displacement, there is only interminable melancholia; for Meillassoux, this is precisely our mortal condition without God. The most eloquent writer on mourning in recent memory has been Derrida, who writes, for very different reasons than Meillassoux, that the work of mourning is impossible: “Whoever thus works *at* the work of mourning learns the impossible— and that mourning is interminable. Inconsolable. Irreconcilable.”<sup>40</sup> But for Derrida, there is a double injunction in mourning, one that those who have had a parent, sibling, or friend die will instantly recognize, even if, for Derrida, the work of mourning structures all our relations from the very beginning. To mourn means an unconditional witnessing to the singularity of the Other, a testimony that could go on

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 451.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 452.

<sup>38</sup> Though Meillassoux puts this discussion in the mouth of a “theist,” it is clear that he agrees that this is the proper *ethical* response to all that haunts us.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 453.

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, trans. Michael Naas and Pascale-Anne Brault (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 143.

without end: each death is just this once, the end of the world, because each will have lived just this once, and one's own uniqueness is how one testifies while mourning all those who have passed. There is always more than "one world," he writes, and a God, he argues, could only ever guarantee a succession across worlds, but never a world as it is lost in the impossible mourning. He writes:

The death of the other, not only but more so if one loves the other, does not announce an absence, a disappearance, the end of this or that life, that is to say, of a world as it would *appear to a given living being*. Death signifies each time the end of the world in totality, the end of every possible world, and each time the end of the world in its total uniqueness, thus *irreplaceable* and infinite. As if the repetition of an infinite whole were once more possible: of the end of the world as such, of *the only world which is*, each time.<sup>41</sup>

Each time the end of the world, not as it is given "for us" or some correlationism, but each time, all over again. However, there is no rule or law for when one stops the testimony to this death. When to end mourning formally? If truly it was the end of the world, how could this not go on without end? When would your return to "normalcy" not be a betrayal? And yet, would not this endless mourning also evince a crucial narcissism, that one is mourning for the other, endlessly, while making oneself incapable of testifying for them—so caught in grief *are you?* And would not all this mourning risk replacing you *for* the Other? Each work of mourning is conditioned by this impossible *aporia*; there thus can be no law of mourning—the regularized spectacles around death barely conceal this fact.

Central to Derrida's account—despite his many criticisms of Heidegger, he never diverted from this point—is the Heideggerian conception that our lives are lived in our being-towards-death, our being towards our future impossibility—and not just ours, but that of our friends and indeed the whole of the world. Existence itself is just this once, singular and unique, always in the shadow of the end of the world.

Where post-Heideggerian ethics in Continental philosophy starts with the premise of our finitude, this is reversed by Meillassoux, since a life without God would be "absurd" and intrinsically unjust.<sup>42</sup> As the atheist would point out, in Meillassoux's depiction, a belief in an existing God would be as absurd as a World without God, since this would be a God who provides for a "moral hell" in which such "essential spectres" come to be.<sup>43</sup> Here is his summation of what he calls the "spectral dilemma":

The religious position maintains that grief is possible only if one is able to hope for something other than their death on behalf of the dead.

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<sup>41</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*, eds. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2003), 9, my emphases.

<sup>42</sup> "Immanence of the World Beyond," 457.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 455-6.

Spectres join their side only on the day when we are able to hope to see them join our own. For the atheist position, the existence of God is an unsurmountable obstacle to the working out of such a hope, because it is unthinkable for the atheist that a just God could allow horrendous deaths.<sup>44</sup>

Implicit to this account is that the only ethical relation to the dead is to wish for their resurrection, to wish for an immortality on their behalf. “The sole possible novelty surpassing humans just as humans surpass life would be the recommencement of the human. . . it is only the World of the rebirth of humans that makes universal justice possible, by *erasing* even the injustice of shattered lives.”<sup>45</sup> Before I come to Meillassoux’s “solution,” we should emphasize again the place of overcoming death in his corpus—such that he hopes that we can put it forever under “erasure.” Recall Borges’s “The Immortal” concerning a Roman soldier who, after a battle, escapes through the desert only to come upon a city of byzantine structures. The people of that city do not die, though this is not a place of joy, but infinite tedium: all has been done before as it will be done again—sorrows and *jouissance*, the quotidian and the extraordinary. Some fall and writhe in pain, but no help is forthcoming, since even pain has lost its meaning. Heidegger’s account of being-towards-death makes clear that this recognition of finitude is what impels us to act here and now, perhaps for a more just world (though not, it should be said, necessarily in Heidegger’s own case), or perhaps for more quotidian, if still important acts. The fact of death would not, then, lead to simple nihilism, as Meillassoux claims, but to the event of meaning and value in the first place. That is, on Heidegger’s account, our finitude is the source, speaking loosely, of our will to act, not just to stare myopically into the dead of the night.

Meillassoux’s answer to the spectral dilemma is that we need neither choose *for* or *against* God’s current existence, as the theists and atheists do, but rather follow the proposition that “God does not *yet* exist.” This is his irreligious doctrine. If God does not exist *now*, then the atheist cannot condemn God for the evil of this World. And yet, that this God *may* exist brings hope for the resurrection of the dead. This God will thus be “innocent of the disasters of the world and in whom one could hope for the power to grant to spectres something besides death.”<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, the event of God is “really possible,” though not necessary, and is therefore “eternally contingent, forever uncontrollable and completely improbabilizable”—just like the *ex nihilo* advents of matter, life, and thought.<sup>47</sup> And “this 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.”<sup>48</sup> Where many 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosophers put the fact of death at the center of their philosophical work, Meillassoux’s French philosophy of the 21<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 458.

<sup>45</sup> “Extracts from *L’inexistence divine*,” 190. I have changed the place of emphasis in this sentence.

<sup>46</sup> “Immanence of the World Beyond,” 458.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 461.

<sup>48</sup> “Interview with Quentin Meillassoux,” 163.

evinces the hope for superceding our mortal coil, a hope for the day when death is itself given its last rites, that is, put on life support for the time being, since, of course, given hyper-chaos, one cannot rule out another World of death to come, a point that would seem to obviate the whole crux of Meillassoux's analysis.

In any case, Meillassoux argues that the immortality to come, if it is to equal the dignity of a God, requires the resurrection of the dead. "The rebirth of bodies is not illogical" and "it must also be possible": it would "occur suddenly in the very fashion in which a new Universe of cases suddenly appears in the midst of the non-Whole."<sup>49</sup> This hope is ethical in nature. At the core of Meillassoux's argument is that if we believe in true equality, then we will see no difference among those of different races, creeds, and even life status—with the latter sounding like a sarcastic version of PC terms from the 1980s. If justice is due to "every human without exception," he argues, it would engage the living and the dead, the young and the old, etc.<sup>50</sup> For Meillassoux, the importance of his solution to the spectral dilemma is not just that it provides a certain hope. Rather, he argues that the rational subject who comes to grips with the possible God will experience a "transformation of subjectivity" "unchained" from either the "sickness of spiritual misfortune" of an unjust world without God or an unjust God that does exist but allows all sorts of calamities to occur. Meillassoux calls this "transformed" being the "vectorial subject," who is "neither religious nor atheist but philosophical."<sup>51</sup> This vectorial subject is "liberated" from what is now eroding it, namely "disillusionment" and "despair."<sup>52</sup> Against the Kantian version of practical reason that is "finite," Meillassoux argues for a new ethics based in the "illimitation of the capacities of reason."<sup>53</sup> Meillassoux argues that this "transversal subject" will need not just to cross from the despair of the choice of either an unjust but existing God or a non-existing God and thus still unjust world, but also a secondary moment he calls "nihilism" in a specific sense. Once this subject realizes the possibility of a future God, only then can this subject be a true nihilist, since the subject may not want this world of the just to come. According to Meillassoux, the vectorial subject, once the world of the just appears, then would be without hope, since, of course, justice would now rule and further change would be unnecessary. But Meillassoux also suggests that his vectorial subject will face something like the inhabitants of Borges's story: "What will we do when we will have become forever what the Middle Ages calls a traveler—a *viator*—a man of the earth and not the blessed in heaven," since, for Meillassoux, we are reborn, with everyone else in *this* world, not in another, though it is unclear whether he could rule out that possibility either. In any case, this "*viator*" would be "forever condemned to his living condition, a kind of prosaic immortal without any transcendence or struggle to give meaning to the undefined pursuit of his being."<sup>54</sup> In other words, we would finally have, he argues,

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<sup>49</sup> "Extracts from *L'inexistence divine*," 189.

<sup>50</sup> "Immanence of the World Beyond," 454.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 464.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 463.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 464.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 473.

a life “without politics” and with universal equality. All that would be left to do would be to live “an existence dedicated to its own proper experience.”<sup>55</sup> Communism is literally, for him, not of this world, but the next.

Inevitable questions arise about this account, and we should not be shy about asking them. Meillassoux’s claim is that there is a transition from this World to the next that is not of our own making, since it “proceeds from an ontological uprising that is independent of our action.”<sup>56</sup> He quickly notes that the vectorial subject will not simply await, passively, the coming World, but it is not at all clear why this would be the case, if, again, all this is “independent of our action.”<sup>57</sup> (Similar claims have been made about Badiou’s thinking of the event.) Moreover Meillassoux’s claim is that despair comes from the divorce of ethics from being; that is, we literally can’t live our values in this World. However, “the goal of every philosophy must be the *immanent* inscription of values in being.”<sup>58</sup> But Meillassoux has yet to explain why his proffered set of values (a world of equality) trumps all others, or would automatically do so for the future God. All thinkers of immanence have had to face the problem of the link between their ontology and their ethics. Certainly, immanentists, as he describes himself, have ways to answer this question, but he avoids it. Moreover, if Meillassoux is right that the true immanentist affirms this life—this is in line with immanentists such as Deleuze and Spinoza—then the irony is that Meillassoux is precisely not doing this: he is saying that the *only* life we can affirm is, in fact, one that would be beyond life: one that does not face injustice and the infirmities of age, a life of politics and a life of difference from one to the other. This all must be “erased,” as he puts it, so that we can live this life forever, and it would be that life that he would *then* affirm. Finally, it is not clear why this outcome would come over any other: why not a life born by a Demiurge who resurrects us only to provide us with greater evils? To paraphrase Dostoyevsky, when God is possible, all is permitted.

We see, then, that we have the tight marriage here of what Derrida, Levinas, and others saw at the heart of Western metaphysics: a hope to master being, to live beyond our mortal coil, which then subtended a metaphysics of eternal presence, in this case, a set theory or form of rationality that is the one thing not open to hyper-chaos. Meillassoux is that rare breed of an unhappy, unaffirming immanentist. His view of a time without becoming leads him to think of miracles that can deliver us from evil. But such a politics would not be a community of those who are finite, who are shared-out in a play of difference. His time, if it came to be, would be an eternal repetition of the same, a time that cannot come to be, for us or anything else, nor should it be the basis for thinking a Continental philosophy of religion after the impasses of the deconstruction of the history of onto-theology.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 474.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 477.

<sup>57</sup> Alain Badiou touches upon this in an interview on speculative realism: For Meillassoux, the future and perhaps the dead will make the final judgement. This is a political weakness. The question is how is the Real of the present deployed for the future? (“Interview with Alain Badiou,” *The Speculative Turn*, 20).

<sup>58</sup> “Extracts from *L’inexistence divine*,” 195.