

## “Correlationism”: The Dogma that Never Was

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Few theoretical movements have developed as quickly or as publicly as the one known, among other names, as “Speculative Realism” and/or “Object-Oriented Philosophy” (hereafter collectively referred to as SR/OOO). The views of each of the main writers associated with these movements—Graham Harman, Ian Bogost, Iain Hamilton Grant, Levi Bryant, and Timothy Morton, among others—vary widely, and even the views offered by these writers individually often vary. What they share in general is a conviction that, as the editors of one of the movement’s primary collections, *The Speculative Turn*, put it, “reality appears in [recent continental] philosophy only as the correlate of human thought,” and that what is needed now in contrast is for theory to “speculat[e] once more about the nature of reality independently of thought and of humanity more generally.”<sup>1</sup>

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1. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, “Towards a Speculative Philosophy” *boundary 2* 43:2 (2016) DOI 10.1215/01903659-3469889 © 2016 by Duke University Press

Almost exclusively in the SR/OOO literature, support for this view is attributed to a single brief book by a French student of Alain Badiou, Quentin Meillassoux, titled *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. The book appeared in France in 2006 and was published in Ray Brassier's English translation in 2008. In *After Finitude*, Meillassoux introduces the terms *correlation* and *correlationism* to advance the argument that the past 250 years of Western philosophy and critical and literary theory, or what he typically calls "post-Kantian philosophy," is contaminated by a deep, thoroughgoing, and almost entirely unrecognized error, an error so profound that philosophy must essentially begin again. Meillassoux's book is so important to SR/OOO that Harman, one of SR/OOO's most active proponents, quickly issued a monograph solely devoted to Meillassoux, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*, that focused almost entirely on *After Finitude*; at the time neither Meillassoux's 1997 dissertation, "L'inexistence Divine" (supervised by Badiou), nor his numerological reading of Stéphane Mallarmé, *The Number and the Siren*, had been published.<sup>2</sup>

In some (though not all) ways *After Finitude* reads like a distillation of Badiou's work, and it often takes as proven facts what are actually argumentative propositions in Badiou.<sup>3</sup> This is only part of what makes *After Finitude* look very strange to readers with an Anglo-American philosophical background: it does not follow typical procedures of philosophical argumentation, and its take on philosophical history, including recent history, is beyond idiosyncratic—it is a picture of philosophy that no notable figure but Badiou has ever previously put forth.<sup>4</sup> This would be less troubling if *After*

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phy," in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 3.

2. Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011); the Mallarmé book has been published in English as *The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé's "Coup de dés"* (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic, 2012).

3. Adrian Johnston, in "Quentin Meillassoux and Alain Badiou's Anti-Kantian Transcendentalism," *Contemporary French Civilization* 33, no. 1 (2009): 73–99, offers an especially thorough analysis of the relationship between the two writers.

4. In the same year that *After Finitude* appeared in France, Tom Rockmore's *In Kant's Wake: Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006) was also published. Rockmore's carefully documented, knowledgeable, and clearly argued work ranges over much of the same conceptual material as does *After Finitude*, but Rockmore's conclusions are both far more nuanced than and often almost completely incompatible with those of Meillassoux.

*Finitude* did not purport to be a systematic critique of all philosophy since Immanuel Kant. Among its most troubling characteristics in this regard are its almost total lack of reference to secondary and interpretive writings on Kant, and to contemporary philosophy in general, because Meillassoux repeatedly tries to show that Kant's influence has made contemporary philosophy correlationist. Instead of demonstrating that flaw *in* contemporary philosophy, though, Meillassoux generally (with very few specifics) argues that Kant himself is correlationist and that this foundational taint itself contaminates what comes after. Meillassoux thus purports to discover something unseen in Kant, and then to claim that this unseen thing has been the dominant influence over all philosophy since Kant, while making no effort to show how correlationism can at one and the same time have been so strongly determinative and also largely unnoticed.

In fact, the highly varied commentary on Kant, much of which focuses on the same questions that interest Meillassoux, must make any reader question the brunt of Meillassoux's attack: does all this work, riven with serious disagreements about the nature of Kant's project, somehow uniformly participate in a subtle error that so many philosophers have failed to appreciate? For that matter, given the enormous differences in philosophical outlook of such figures as Bertrand Russell, Gottlob Frege, A. J. Ayer, Wilfrid Sellars, Rudolf Carnap, Ludwig Wittgenstein (early and late), W. V. Quine, Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam, Michael Dummett, Saul Kripke, David Armstrong, David Lewis, Thomas Nagel, Jerry Fodor, Paul Guyer, and Bas van Fraassen—just to name some of the most prominent analytic philosophers whose work touches on issues raised by Meillassoux—how can one take seriously the claim that they are all correlationist, especially where the only attempt to demonstrate this error is made by analyzing not their own works but positions (and not even, for the most part, actual writings) of Kant?

Despite the widespread impression that Meillassoux has conclusively deflated most recent philosophy, in recent work his own version of the claim has narrowed, so that he now speaks of "Continental philosophy," rather than philosophy *tout court*, as correlationist, but still without explaining (as several of his commentators have urged) why the detailed analytical discussion of the questions he raises can or should be dismissed out of hand.<sup>5</sup> What is most worrisome about this from an institutional perspec-

5. In "Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign," a talk delivered at the Free University in Berlin, April 20, 2012 (trans. Robin Mackay, [oursecretblog.com/txt/QMpaperApr12.pdf](http://oursecretblog.com/txt/QMpaperApr12.pdf)), Meillassoux appears to silently withdraw

tive is that in his reception in the English-speaking world, Meillassoux's work has been taken to show that Anglo-American analytic philosophy is also so tainted by correlationism as not to be worth taking seriously, in part because Meillassoux explicitly makes this claim. What jars the philosophically informed reader is that the issues thereby raised turn out to be *central* ones in disciplinary philosophical discourse, which Meillassoux is understood to have eliminated the need to address. What Meillassoux's work appears to do is therefore to license a kind of philosophy *ex nihilo* and without connection to existing practice, and what it thus engenders is a philosophical discourse that repeatedly fails to respect most of the methods of that practice: to state clearly its contentions, to define its terms, to distinguish between philosophical issues (particularly epistemology and metaphysics), or to demonstrate textually its historical-philosophical assessments. As such, it creates a spectral philosophical orthodoxy that is largely incoherent and that few if any practicing philosophers actually endorse; for not only is analytic philosophy not correlationist insofar as we can make sense of what Meillassoux says about it, but the issues Meillassoux claims have been overlooked in post-Kantian philosophy are instead often the main topics of philosophical discourse.

In significant ways, especially as a discourse, the entire SR/OOO enterprise is built on the single support of Meillassoux's "critique of correlationism," but despite this reliance, Meillassoux's critique fails to establish its basic premises, and fails and will have to fail to demonstrate the accuracy of its interpretation of post-Kantian philosophy, since it is manifestly out of step with that philosophy. This is not, necessarily, to discount SR/OOO as an enterprise, let alone some of its individual exemplars, since it is not always clear in philosophical or theoretical terms how much SR/OOO

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the condemnation of analytic philosophy in *After Finitude* with which this essay is concerned: "What we might call 'the era of Correlation' . . . continues, in my opinion, to dominate *continental* philosophy today" (3; emphasis added). Since his complaint is pitched against "the various destructions and deconstructions that all traditional metaphysics have undergone over the last century and a half" (1), his failure to engage with the huge body of analytic metaphysics becomes all the more pointed. Commentators on Meillassoux have noted his remarkable lack of engagement with philosophy of science; see Adrian Johnston, "Hume's Revenge: A Dieu, Meillassoux?," in Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, *Speculative Turn*, 92–113; Fabio Gironi, "Meillassoux's Speculative Philosophy of Science: Contingency and Mathematics," *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 22 (2011): 25–60; and Christian Thorne, "Outward Bound: On Meillassoux's *After Finitude*," November 23, 2011, <http://sites.williams.edu/cthorne/articles/outward-bound-on-quentin-meillassouxs-after-finitude/>.

analyses require the "critique of correlationism" to ground themselves. Whatever the merits of SR/OOO, it cannot rest on the "critique of correlationism," because "correlationism" in the terms Meillassoux describes it is in large part philosophically incoherent and, to the degree that it can be made clear, results in a demonstrably inaccurate description of recent philosophical practice—itself an ironic state of affairs, given Meillassoux's desire to get us closer to accurate descriptions of things in the world.

### Correlationism

Meillassoux writes that "the central notion of modern philosophy since Kant seems to be that of *correlation*" (AF, 5).<sup>6</sup> By "correlation," Meillassoux means "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other." Correlationism, then, "consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of each other. Not only does it become possible to insist that we never grasp an object 'in itself,' in isolation from its relation to the subject, but it also becomes necessary to maintain that we can never grasp a subject that would not always-already be related to an object" (AF, 5). The loose phrasing and lack of definition in these statements exemplify a characteristic problem for Meillassoux, wherein overtly metaphysical claims are embedded in epistemological or cognitive statements, statements about what "we only ever have access to" rather than about what there *is*, and as if Meillassoux will offer a perspective that does consider them separately, which he is repeatedly unwilling or unable to do.<sup>7</sup> Also characteristic

6. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2008); hereafter cited parenthetically as *AF*. Meillassoux frequently emphasizes words and phrases in his text; unless indicated otherwise, any emphases in quotations are those found in the original. Where useful for clarity, I have occasionally cited the French original, Quentin Meillassoux, *Après la finitude* (Paris: Seuil, 2006); hereafter cited parenthetically as *AIF*.

7. In a fascinating exchange after Meillassoux presented some of the arguments in *After Finitude* after its publication, Peter Hallward points out this characteristic ambiguity in Meillassoux's work: "It seems to me that you shuttle between an *ontological* argument that you associate with metaphysics . . . and use that to demolish what are essentially *epistemological* arguments that underpin the correlationist post-Kantian position." Meillassoux admits to the criticism without acknowledging the problem it creates for his position: "Correlationism—you're right—is not an ontology, strictly speaking. The correlationist—it's true—doesn't say that reality is the correlation. It's the metaphysics of subjectivity

is the unsupported institutional claim that philosophers “never consider” either thinking or being apart from each other, when the entire disciplines of philosophy of mind and cognitive science, to take two obvious examples, explicitly consider *thinking* separately from any consideration of being. The converse project, to think being without considering thinking, is made logically and conceptually problematic by the same issue that dogs Meillassoux, namely, the unavoidable use of cognition in any statement of it: how do we *think* being apart from thinking, without *thinking* as we do it? It will turn out that, despite his reliance on such statements as basic definitions of correlationism, Meillassoux never crafts propositions that avoid the very problems he claims to have identified, or in other words, to make coherent or legible the problems he takes to be foundational.

Such characteristic vagueness in the statement of what should be central claims are reflected in the odd syntax Meillassoux uses in his definition of correlationism (also present in the original: “Le corrélationisme consiste à disqualifier toute prétention à considérer . . .” [A/F, 18–19]), in which correlationism turns out not to be a claim or view or even the “notion” Meillassoux claims elsewhere but an attitude or disposition that “consists in disqualifying” another claim, in this case the claim that “we can consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of each other,” which this assertion notwithstanding is clearly something philosophers including Kant frequently do, to the extent that we can make philosophical sense of the phrase. It is typical of Meillassoux’s writing that at critical moments, just where precise statement of terms is vital, precision is instead swept aside, as in the case of the “it is possible/becomes possible to consider” in this statement. Possible for whom? In what domain? This is loose talk of a sort most philosophers work hard to avoid, talk that specifically yokes in a knowing subject as it overtly critiques others for failing to be clear about their epistemological (or metaphysical) commitments. What does it mean for something “to become possible” in the sense Meillassoux is using the expression here?

While Meillassoux paints correlationism as incompatible with realism (at least with what he calls, without bibliographic reference, naive realism), he repeatedly assigns to correlationism an explicit rejection of the existence of the material world (though he seems not to notice that this itself

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that says that. He just says we cannot know anything apart from what we can perceive or conceive, etc. That’s all. I refuse to say, on the contrary, that I can’t say anything about the absolute.” From “Presentation by Quentin Meillassoux,” in *Collapse III: Unknown Deleuze* (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic, 2007), 444–45.

logically entails some "consideration" of that material world even in the act of rejecting its existence, something that he claims correlationism rules out). Along with his invocations of Kant and George Berkeley (and "post-modernism") as enemies, this makes the distance between correlationism and idealism hard to determine. Thus, Meillassoux writes that under his analysis, "every variety of correlationism is exposed as an extreme idealism, one that is incapable of admitting that what science tells us about these occurrences of matter independent of humanity effectively occurred as described by science" (*AF*, 18).<sup>8</sup> In a talk delivered after the publication of *After Finitude*, Meillassoux appears to admit that he introduced the term "correlationism" for a practical and seemingly illegitimate scholarly reason: to avoid having to engage with the voluminous anti-idealist philosophical literature that would make his assessments less tractable: "I have given the name 'correlationism' to the contemporary opponent of any realism. By this term, I wanted to avoid the usual 'parade' of transcendental philosophy and phenomenology against the accusation of idealism—I mean answers such as: 'Kantian criticism is not a subjective idealism since there is a refutation of idealism in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.'" <sup>9</sup> It is hard to know how readers should take such sentiments. At best, Meillassoux seems openly to admit that "correlationism" is just a new word for idealism, a doctrine to which few if any philosophers subscribe today or, with the exception of the "German idealists," have subscribed to since Kant, and one to which he here acknowledges Kant offers direct counterarguments in the first *Critique* itself. Further, it is impossible to reconcile the identification of "the contemporary opponent of any realism" with the detailed and unattributed presentation in *After Finitude* of correlationism's epistemological commitments, from which many if not most opponents of doctrinal realism explicitly demur.

### Varieties of Correlationism

For readers of Kant and the extensive commentaries on him, what is especially jarring about *After Finitude*'s anti-Kantian rhetoric is that Meillas-

8. "Matter independent of humanity" is part of Meillassoux's "ancestrality" or "arche-fossil" thought experiment, flawed for many of the same reasons that his correlationism diagnosis is flawed. Johnston, in "Hume's Revenge," and Peter Hallward, in "Anything Is Possible: A Reading of Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*," in Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, *Speculative Turn*, 130–41, address most of the problems with the thought experiment.

9. Meillassoux, "Presentation," 408.

soux's claims are so often directly contradicted by Kant's own plain statements in the first *Critique* (including, as Meillassoux admits in the 2007 "Presentation," the "Refutation of Idealism" in version B of the first *Critique*) and elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> Kant is far more careful in his discussions of the epistemic capabilities of the human mind than Meillassoux wants his readers to believe, and that care forces Kant's readers to think in a more fine-grained way than Meillassoux allows about just what the world of objects might be to which humans may have various kinds of access. The scholarly literature on Kant is replete with works that specifically reject the idea that Kant is an idealist, and many works stress not just the compatibility of Kant's work with empirical science, but the very empirical basis of the critical philosophy in scientific thinking.<sup>11</sup> Students of Kant must be puzzled by the arguments in the first chapter of *After Finitude* given Kant's repeated rejection of idealism, in famous passages such as this one from the preface to the second edition of the first *Critique*:

We cannot have cognition of any object as thing in itself, but can have such cognition only insofar as the object is one of sensible intuition, i.e., an appearance. And from this it does indeed follow that any possible speculative cognition of reason is restricted to mere objects of *experience*. On the other hand, it must be noted carefully that this is always subject to this reservation: that we must be able at least to *think*, even if not cognize, the same objects also as things in themselves. (Bxxvi–xxvii)<sup>12</sup>

10. Because Meillassoux so frequently invokes the incompatibility of science and correlationism, of particular relevance is Kant's 1786 *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, a work that is widely understood in Kant scholarship to show just how compatible are Kantian philosophy and science. See in particular Michela Massimi, ed., "Kant and Philosophy of Science Today," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 63 (2008); and Robert E. Butts, ed., *Kant's Philosophy of Physical Science: Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaft, 1786–1986* (Dordrecht, the Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1986).

11. Close readings of Kant that paint a very different picture from Meillassoux's include Paul Abela, *Kant's Empirical Realism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Kenneth R. Westphal, *Kant's Transcendental Proof of Realism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Michael Friedman, *Kant and the Exact Sciences* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). In *Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), Rae Langton offers a carefully argued, virtual point-by-point refutation of Meillassoux's interpretation of Kant *avant la lettre*, thick with textual detail.

12. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996). All passages from the *Critique* are taken from this dual-edition version and



Kant goes out of his way to account for and even to embrace human *thinking* about the noumena even as he is careful to restrict *knowledge* to that of which we humans have experience. If we mean to contradict this idea we must make the outlandish assertion that we have *knowledge* of what lies outside of experience (knowledge here meaning something like *certainty*); such knowledge is traditionally referred to as religious faith, and it is beyond peculiar for Meillassoux to assert that this sort of relation is a secularization or empiricization of Kant's thought, because it is resolutely clear how secular and empiricist Kant means to be.<sup>13</sup> Meillassoux thus puts himself in the unfortunate position of needing to insist that human beings can *know with certainty* objects of *experience* (i.e., not a priori results) *of which they have no experience whatever* (neither direct nor indirect, as via scientific measuring instruments), and that this knowledge is somehow *more* scientific than what current philosophy allows.

Throughout *After Finitude*, Meillassoux also fails to acknowledge or discuss Kant's terminology, and this is nowhere more notable than in the failure to grant the distinction vital to Kant, as in the foregoing passage, between *thinking about* something and *knowing* something or, in modern terminology, between *cognition* and *knowledge*.<sup>14</sup> Meillassoux thus often directly contradicts Kant: "What we have just claimed is that thought is capable of discriminating between those properties of the world which are a function of our relation to it, and those properties of the world as it is 'in itself,' subsisting indifferently of our relation to it. But we all know that such a thesis has become indefensible, and this not only since Kant, but even since Berkeley" (*AF*, 3–4). We have already seen that Kant goes out of his way to assert that we *can* think about the thing-in-itself; what Kant denies is that we can *know* it the same way we know the objects of our experience. In fact the human propensity to think about what it cannot know has long been understood as one of the wellsprings of Kant's project in general, and

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follow the traditional practice of citing the editions respectively as A (1781) and B (1787) with corresponding page numbers.

13. It is hard to escape the feeling that Meillassoux very much wants to access a kind of religious faith, as evidenced in his dissertation, "L'inexistence divine: Essai sur le dieu virtuel," and in his frequent references to God and to a "virtual God" in *After Finitude*. On the apparent religious dimension of Meillassoux's thought, see Johnston, "Hume's Revenge"; and Martin Hägglund, "Radical Atheist Materialism: A Critique of Meillassoux," in Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, *Speculative Turn*, 114–29.

14. See, for example, Rudolf A. Makkreel, "The Cognition-Knowledge Distinction in Kant and Dilthey and the Implications for Psychology and Self-Understanding," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 34 (2003): 149–64.

the thought that we are not capable of discriminating between primary and secondary qualities as a matter of thought is, overtly, anathema to Kant.

Perhaps the most startling fact about *After Finitude* is that despite the overt claims in its first chapter to have identified the correlationist error in Kant and post-Kantian philosophy, in the second and third of the book's five chapters Meillassoux admits that Kant was *not* a correlationist, relying on some of those same features of the first *Critique* he overlooks in *After Finitude*'s first chapter. Meillassoux accomplishes this by introducing in *After Finitude*'s second chapter a distinction between "strong" and "weak" correlationism. Kant, he now argues, is a "weak" correlationist, because "the Critical philosophy does not prohibit all relation between thought and the absolute. It proscribes any knowledge of the thing-in-itself (any application of the categories to the supersensible), but maintains the thinkability of the in-itself. According to Kant, we know *a priori* that the thing in itself is non-contradictory and that it actually exists" (AF, 35). What is especially striking about this admission is that it precisely uses the language with which Meillassoux before and after this remark *defines* correlationism, while explicitly stating that it does not apply to Kant. Again and again, both in Meillassoux and in SR/OOO, it is the prohibition on the relation between *thought* (not *knowledge*) and the absolute that constitutes correlationism; yet as any cursory reading of Kant shows, Kant observes no such prohibition, and indeed the idea that Kant would write so often about the thing-in-itself while denying that he or his readers could *think* about it is plainly nonsensical. Meillassoux never explains how one flavor of correlationism can reject what he elsewhere names as its core tenet. Yet Meillassoux's attacks from this point of *After Finitude* forward take "strong" correlationism as the operant form of the doctrine, even when, as in the book's fourth and fifth chapters, Kant returns as their main critical target.

"Strong" correlationism is an even murkier doctrine than the "weak" variety (or correlationism *sans* modifier), and Meillassoux is even more evasive about naming practicing strong correlationists than about naming correlationists in general, since he thinks that those who subscribe to correlationism rarely if ever admit to doing so: the "strong model . . . seems to be dominant today, even if it is never explicitly thematized as such" (AF, 30). "Strong correlationism is not always thematized as such by those who espouse it" (AF, 43). That he has in mind a very familiar and tired critique of literary theory and in particular poststructuralism as it is practiced by the likes of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Jean-François Lyotard is suggested by the naming of "the parti-

sans of 'radical finitude' or of 'postmodernity,' who dismiss every variety of universal as a mystificatory relic of the old metaphysics" (*AF*, 43), but no direct engagement with these figures is offered in *After Finitude*, and there is much in the works of each of these writers that comports very poorly with the core tenets of correlationism.<sup>15</sup> Meillassoux is willing to name outright as strong correlationists only two philosophers, who make a very odd pair: Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger. The *only* attempt to demonstrate empirically the existence of strong correlationism as a live doctrine anywhere in philosophy or theory at all in the entirety of *After Finitude* is this:

The strong model in this characterization seems to us to be represented as much by Wittgenstein as by Heidegger, which is to say, by the two emblematic representatives of the two principal currents of twentieth-century philosophy: analytic philosophy and phenomenology. Thus, the *Tractatus* maintains that the logical form of the world cannot be stated in the way in which facts in the world can be; it can only be "shown," that is to say, indicated in accordance with a discursive register that cannot be bound by the categories of science or logic. Consequently, it is the very fact that the world is sayable (that is to say, liable to formulation according to a logical syntax) that cannot be bound by logical discourse. Whence proposition 6.522: "There are indeed things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical." But the mystical does not consist in other-worldly knowledge—it is the indication of science's inability to think the fact that there is a world. Hence proposition 6.44: "It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists." Similarly, we have already seen how for Heidegger it is the very fact that there are beings, and that there is a givenness of beings, that points to the rift inherent in representation: "Of all beings, only the human being, called upon by the voice of Being, experiences the wonder of all wonders: *that* beings *are*."<sup>16</sup> In both cases, the fact that beings are, or the fact that there is a logical

15. Martin Hägglund makes a convincing case that "Derrida is one of the intended targets" of Meillassoux's attack and offers significant reason to question its accuracy, in "Radical Atheist Materialism," 115. In "Towards a Speculative Philosophy," their introduction to *Speculative Turn*, Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman specifically name "phenomenology, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism" as "perfect exemplars of the anti-realist trend in continental philosophy" (3) that SR/OOO claims to upend.

16. Martin Heidegger, "On the Question of Being," in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 308 [Meillassoux's note].

world, is precisely what cannot be encompassed by the sovereignty of logic and metaphysical reason, and this because of the facticity of the “there is.” (AF, 41–42)<sup>17</sup>

This passage would be remarkable even were it not the exclusive presentation of strong correlationism in a treatise that is said to dismantle that doctrine entirely. Contra Meillassoux’s suggestion that Wittgenstein and Heidegger together represent all post-Kantian philosophy, it seems clear enough historically that Heidegger (or, given the textual evidence Meillassoux relies on, the Heidegger of *Being and Time*) represents a single strand of philosophical thought that might accurately be called “Heideggerian” or even “phenomenological,” and that if Meillassoux’s accusation was that “Heideggerian philosophy is correlationist,” it would seem far less controversial, far less dramatic, and frankly far less interesting, even if its conclusion would remain controversial, than the claim about “post-Kantian philosophy.” More startling are his comments on Wittgenstein, and their implication in the view that has gripped readers so strongly, that *all* of modern philosophical thought can be characterized as correlationist. It is this pole of his accusation that demands the closest scrutiny.

It is fair to take Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* as one of several representative starting points for analytic philosophy, but within analytic circles the *Tractatus* comes somewhat late to deserve that designation alone; much more common within the discipline would be the works of Gottlob Frege or of Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead, which predate Wittgenstein by decades, and none of which have ever been understood as tending toward idealism.<sup>18</sup> If the point is to show that analytic philosophy is correlationist, given that work’s repeated engagement with issues of metaphysics, epistemology, and cognition, Meillassoux has chosen a remarkably unrepresentative site from which to do it. However we understand their meaning, it would be difficult if not impossible to demonstrate that Wittgenstein’s closing remarks in the *Tractatus* serve the institutional function for

17. Ray Brassier’s translation of *After Finitude* silently incorporates the D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness translation of Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Routledge, 1974).

18. Thus in his widely cited history *Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), the renowned analytic philosopher Michael Dummett focuses almost exclusively on Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, Alfred North Whitehead, and Edmund Husserl, and discusses Wittgenstein only briefly, despite Dummett’s lifetime commitment to Wittgenstein. Rockmore, in *In Kant’s Wake*, traces a similar genealogy that has little if anything in common with the one developed by Meillassoux.

analytic philosophy that Meillassoux claims for them. Further, this passage reinforces the sense of *After Finitude* as partly a distillation of Badiou's own philosophical prejudices, as this interpretation of Wittgenstein is identical (down to the specific passages quoted) with the one advanced by Badiou in his very arch *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*.<sup>19</sup>

What makes all of this so jarring to the student of analytic philosophy is that the standard interpretation of the *Tractatus*, the one that makes Wittgenstein's work coincide to some extent with the perspectives of Russell and Frege and, perhaps even more important, the one that has been influential in twentieth-century philosophical practice and that is taught in Anglo-American schools, is that in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein is a *realist* of a fairly direct sort. Many statements in the work make this abundantly clear. Thus in a recent essay, Hilary Putnam offers straightforward descriptions of Wittgenstein that sound almost like the position Meillassoux recommends, rather than the one he opposes:

The so-called "realism" of the *Tractatus*, the "realism" that consists in taking at face value the totality of possibilities represented in the language (which are also the propositions of science), is what Kant called "empirical realism." But Kant thought the possibility of empirical realism could only be seen from the perspective of his "transcendental idealism." Wittgenstein (in the *Tractatus* and pre-Tractarian writings) is saying that transcendental idealism is unintelligible nonsense. I spoke a moment ago of taking the propositions of "the" language—which is also "ordinary language," according to the *Tractatus*, and also the language of science—at "face value"; but taking them at face value is the only way there is to take them! *That's* the point.<sup>20</sup>

Meillassoux argues that "the *Tractatus* maintains that the logical form of the world cannot be stated in the way in which facts in the world can be," but this is a characteristic, uncharitable, and highly unorthodox reading, since "precisely the point that Wittgenstein was making in the *Tractatus*" is that "there is no standpoint available *to us* outside the language" (emphasis added) from which to make sense of Meillassoux's observation about logical form—there simply are no statements inside our language that provide objective validation for it.<sup>21</sup> Asserting that we do have a standpoint available

19. Alain Badiou, *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy* (New York: Verso, 2011).

20. Hilary Putnam, "Wittgenstein and Realism," *International Journal of Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (2008): 5–6.

21. Putnam, "Wittgenstein and Realism," 8.

from which to make such a determination—in Putnam’s words, to distinguish between the propositions “chairs exist” and “chairs *really* exist”—is to deny the entire thrust of Wittgenstein’s philosophy in order to accuse it of an error that Wittgenstein himself goes out of his way to prevent his reader from making, that few readers of Wittgenstein have thought he was making, and that few if any followers of Wittgenstein attribute to him.

In his analysis, Meillassoux quotes two of the most gnomic propositions in the *Tractatus*, ones that specify certain phenomena Wittgenstein calls “mystical.” *Mystical* is a term that is notoriously hard to define even for Wittgensteinians, but it clearly points to consideration of some kind of metaphysical issues. If the point is that the fact of the *existence* of the external world is a “mystical” fact, then that would seem to put the fact of its existence outside of any direct human relation to it, which is just what Meillassoux and SR/OOO keep asserting; and if by “mystical” Wittgenstein is taken to mean that our contact with the external world in general is in some way metaphysical and not, therefore, of a propositional or truth-referential form (the way his claims are commonly understood), that would seem to constitute exactly a kind of contact between “thought and the absolute” (AF, 128) that Meillassoux claims is the cardinal error of correlationist thought.<sup>22</sup> Rather than being forgotten, though, such a belief would seem to occupy a central place in the most influential body of post-Kantian philosophy in the English-speaking world. It also tends to suggest that contrary to the claims of SR/OOO’s novelty, what it offers is very close to the metaphysical realism of which Putnam himself has long offered withering critiques.<sup>23</sup> It is no less close to what a philosopher with a very different orientation, Bernard Williams, calls the “conception of the world as it is independently of all observers.”<sup>24</sup>

### Meillassoux on Philosophical Practice

Such gestures read less like oversights and more like characteristic features of *After Finitude* from its opening pages. Its first sentences

22. See Brian McGuinness, “The Mysticism of the *Tractatus*,” *Philosophical Review* 75, no. 3 (July 1966): 305–28, for a relevant (and unexceptional within analytic circles) explanation of this part of Wittgenstein’s language that contradicts Meillassoux’s interpretation.

23. See, for example, Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981) and *The Many Faces of Realism* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 1988).

24. Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Inquiry* (New York: Penguin, 1978), 241.

offer a strange and symptomatic allegation about the state of philosophy: "The theory of primary and secondary qualities seems to belong to an irremediably obsolete philosophical past. It is time it was rehabilitated. For the contemporary reader, such a distinction might appear to be a piece of scholastic sophistry, devoid of any fundamental philosophical import. Yet as we shall see, what is at stake in it is the nature of thought's relation to the absolute" (AF, 1). While Meillassoux might be fairly understood to be writing primarily about philosophy in France, his authority and that of the critique of correlationism, to say nothing of the literal meaning of his words and the figures like Heidegger and Wittgenstein he invokes directly, are widely understood to extend to the entirety of the Western philosophical tradition, so these opening words of *After Finitude* must give any philosophically informed reader serious pause, because they so completely misrepresent the state of philosophical study. As an index of this strangely out-of-touch quality of *After Finitude*, compare it with introductory comments by the US philosopher Lawrence Nolan in his 2011 edited volume, *Primary and Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate*:

There are few philosophical doctrines, if any, which are more familiar than the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Most philosophers cut their teeth on it as part of their undergraduate training in the discipline, and for good reason. Studying the doctrine of qualities introduces one to a wide swath of issues in metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of perception, and semantics. It also forces one to confront questions about the relation between philosophy and science, and about the nature of scientific explanation.<sup>25</sup>

The question of primary and secondary qualities is not part of an irremediably obsolete philosophical past at all; it is not sophistry; it is of fundamental philosophical import rather than being "devoid" of it; and so on. Further, despite the lack of argumentative tone and content offered by Nolan, it is his work, rather than Meillassoux's, that provides evidence for the institutional claims that undergird it: the book includes a bibliography of over two hundred works from across the entire twentieth century and early twenty-first that address various aspects of the question, not one of which Meillassoux mentions.

25. Lawrence Nolan, introduction to *Primary and Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

This is not just a bibliographic error; as Nolan suggests, questions of the existence and nature of objects, the relation between perception and metaphysics, the status of thought and knowledge, are not just of interest but are the actual substance of disciplinary philosophy in the English-speaking world, and beyond it as well. The very act of studying these discourses is predicated on learning to distinguish among epistemological, cognitive, and metaphysical claims, to discriminate in one's writing among such claims, and to learn the ways of making philosophical claims linguistically precise so as to enable clear discussion of them.

Despite Meillassoux's admission that Kant is not a strong correlationist and does not adhere to the central doctrine that is supposed to characterize correlationism and make it so objectionable, in the fourth and fifth chapters of *After Finitude* Kant returns as the signal villain of modern thought, with little if anything being done to explain why, not subscribing to the offending doctrine at which *After Finitude* is pointed, he remains a target of critique. In the fifth and final chapter of *After Finitude* in particular, Meillassoux makes much more explicit that correlationism's most critical sin is the supposed lack of fit between correlationist philosophies and scientific practice.

Now Meillassoux writes that his particular concern is for the "capacity whereby mathematized science is able to deploy a world that is separable from man . . . that rendered possible the essential alliance between the Galilean and *Copernican* revolutions" (AF, 115). "In speaking of 'the Copernican revolution,'" Meillassoux writes, again bucking most received notions of the history of science and philosophy, "what we have in mind is not so much the astronomical discovery of the decentering of the terrestrial observer within the solar system, but rather the much more fundamental decentering which presided over the mathematization of nature, viz., *the decentering of thought relative to the world within the process of knowledge*" (AF, 115).

Meillassoux only fully states the central argument of *After Finitude* in its final pages. That argument rests on a unique and, at best, idiosyncratic interpretation of many foundational precepts of both modern philosophy and science:

Even as science, by virtue of its power of decentering, revealed to thought the latter's own speculative power, philosophy, at the very moment when it was ratifying this takeover, did so by abjuring all speculation, which is to say, by renouncing any possibility of thinking the nature of this revolution. Something akin to a "catastro-



phe" occurred in this changeover from metaphysics to science as a guarantor of knowledge—Copernican science provided the impetus for philosophy's abandonment of speculative metaphysics, but this abandonment was reflected back onto Copernican science as philosophy's Ptolemaic interpretation of the latter. Thus, philosophy's message to science was: "it is you (and not speculative metaphysics) that holds the reins of knowledge, but the underlying nature of this knowledge is the very opposite of what it seems to you." In other words, in providing the impetus for philosophy's destruction of speculative metaphysics, science also destroyed any possibility of a philosophical understanding of its own essence. (AF, 120)

Like much in *After Finitude*, this purportedly new reading of Kant is a familiar one from the philosophical literature with which Meillassoux engages at only a surface level. That Kant's metaphorical use of Copernicus admits of more than one reading, for example, is a point covered by most analytic discussions of the first *Critique*, including ones as widely available as Paul Guyer's 1987 *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*.<sup>26</sup> Guyer's discussion shows that there is no case for Meillassoux's accusation that post-Kantian philosophy denies the existence of the external world in an unreflective or dogmatic fashion, even among those readers of Kant who believe he offers such an idealist perspective, let alone among philosophers in general. Further, the focus on the Copernican metaphor obscures the far more important engagement of Kant with Newton: "Kant envisages his *Critique* on the order of Newton's *Principia*, and following the method detailed in his *Opticks*," writes the analytic philosopher Robert Hahn.<sup>27</sup> "Kant envisages Hume's attack on the validity of causal inference as an attack on the possibility of all empirical knowledge," he goes on, so that "Kant's argument against Hume thus becomes *ex hypothesi* an argument for the validity of Newtonian physics."<sup>28</sup>

Accepting his own rereading of the Copernican revolution in Kant's philosophy as inarguably valid, Meillassoux then asks:

Why did philosophy not take the course exactly opposite to the one followed by transcendental or phenomenological idealism, viz., the

26. Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

27. Robert Hahn, *Kant's Newtonian Revolution in Philosophy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 2.

28. Hahn, *Kant's Newtonian Revolution*, 12.

course of a thought capable of accounting for the non-correlational scope of mathematics, which is to say, for the very existence of science, the latter being properly understood as the power to decenter thought? Why did philosophy, in attempting to think science, err towards transcendental idealism instead of resolutely orienting itself, as it should have, towards a *speculative materialism*? (AF, 121)

Soon after this he concludes: “The deception that presides over this catastrophe is revealed to be what we earlier referred to as the ‘de-absolutizing implication,’ that is to say, the idea that *there is an irrefutable inference from the end of metaphysics to the end of absolutes*. Since science has convinced us that all metaphysics is illusory, and since every absolute is metaphysical, then it follows that, in order to think science, we must renounce every form of absolute” (AF, 125). “Yet this,” Meillassoux argues, “was not what modern science actually required” (AF, 125). His alternative version of “philosophy’s task consists in re-absolutizing the scope of mathematics—thereby remaining, contrary to correlationism, faithful to thought’s Copernican de-centering—but without lapsing back into any sort of metaphysical necessity, which has indeed become obsolete” (AF, 126). Few passages in *After Finitude* lay their cards so clearly on the table, because in the lexicons of most philosophical practice, including that of Kant, the terms *metaphysical* and *absolute* (neither of them terribly precise, especially when used in such a general manner) point at just the same things, and Meillassoux admits this in one sentence while denying it in the next. “Since every absolute is metaphysical,” he writes (“et puisque tout absolu est de type métaphysique” [AIF, 174]), with the only available justification being that the terms are identical, followed closely by the task of “re-absolutizing the scope of mathematics . . . without lapsing into any sort of metaphysical necessity.” Perhaps such a distinction is plausible, but one searches *After Finitude* in vain for any detailed explication of what it is supposed to mean, including his unconvincing and symptomatically decontextualized excursus on the Cantorian transfinite.

Despite the widespread adoption of the critique of correlationism in SR/OOO, among many of whose prominent writers a wide variety of objects are offered as primary concerns, the attentive reader must note how specific are those objects to which Meillassoux believes correlationism has denied proper status: they are almost without exception mathematical. “Our speculative reformulation of what we must now call ‘Kant’s problem’”—despite his earlier clear admission that Kant is no correlationist and his failure to identify Kantians who are—“can be stated as follows:

how is a mathematized science of nature possible?" (AF, 126). Meillassoux appears not to notice that this problem strongly resembles the one around which the first *Critique* itself is overtly structured but which is not mentioned once in *After Finitude*—"How is synthetic a priori knowledge possible," where mathematical propositions are the canonical examples of such knowledge)—but by removing it from its historical context and deferring it for so long in his own inquiry (only two pages of text remain in *After Finitude* after he poses this question), Meillassoux deprives his reader of the chance to reflect on the familiarity of the question and his answers to it.

Whether or not one believes in absolute truth, the status of mathematics is both special and problematic for almost all philosophers and deserves and receives special consideration. Few if any examples can be found to prove the converse of Meillassoux's suggestion: that there exists a host of correlationist philosophers who *deny* that mathematical statements present particular metaphysical and epistemological challenges precisely because they appear to embody principles that are discoverable by human reason and yet seem true regardless of any discovery or knowledge of them. More disturbing from an institutional perspective is that a philosophical and mathematical doctrine has existed since at least the early 1900s that is explicitly committed to the existence of mathematical objects as somehow special and different with regard to most other objects in the world. This doctrine is known as mathematical Platonism. On its most charitable interpretation, *After Finitude* seems to be advocating for such a view, without ever acknowledging the existence of such a doctrine. (While Meillassoux's teacher, Alain Badiou, gives short shrift to mathematical Platonism, he does at least discuss it briefly in his works; Meillassoux never mentions it.)<sup>29</sup>

Platonism in mathematics is taken seriously across a range of analytic circles, where it is understood as the "metaphysical view that there are abstract mathematical objects whose existence is independent of us and our language, thought, and practices."<sup>30</sup> Figures as diverse and central to

29. See Alain Badiou, "Platonism and Mathematical Ontology," in *Theoretical Writings* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 49–58. In a manner somewhat consistent with Meillassoux's odd exegetical procedures, Badiou disavows the doctrine primarily by arguing that Plato did not subscribe to it, appearing not to recognize that the term is not used in contemporary philosophical discourse as a description of Plato's views, while endorsing many aspects of what is today called Platonism. Further, Badiou applauds central aspects of the archetypal Platonist Kurt Gödel's positions, calling him "(with Cohen) the greatest of Cantor's heirs" (55).

30. Øystein Linnebo, "Platonism in the Philosophy of Mathematics," *Stanford Encyclo-*

analytic philosophy as Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, and Kurt Gödel, as well as more recent writers including Crispin Wright and Bob Hale, Stewart Shapiro, and Mark Balaguer, all defend the doctrine in one form or another. Central works by W. V. Quine, Hilary Putnam, and Michael Dummett consider the position seriously and even accept some parts of the Platonist doctrine. Much as with his statements on primary and secondary qualities, it is hard to understand even in the most literal and bibliographical sense what evidence Meillassoux is relying on to support his assertion that modern thought has “renounced” “the absolute scope of mathematics” (AF, 125). Yet he discusses no contemporary philosophy of mathematics other than Badiou, and there only to endorse Badiou’s controversial and unorthodox interpretation of Cantorian set theory.

### Meillassoux’s Metaphysics

One of the many ironies of the suggestion that correlationism represents the unacknowledged dogma underlying all post-Kantian philosophy is that the *anticorrelationist* position developed by Meillassoux closely resembles one of the most prominent positions in twentieth-century analytic philosophy, sometimes even associated with the *Tractatus* with which Meillassoux so quickly dispenses. Putnam famously calls this doctrine *metaphysical realism* and considers it central to analytic philosophy from its inception: “On this perspective, the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. There is exactly one true and complete description of ‘the way the world is.’ Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things. I shall call this perspective the *externalist* perspective, because its favorite point of view is a God’s Eye point of view.”<sup>31</sup> “The world consists of some totality of mind-independent objects” could be taken as a fair summary of Meillassoux’s doctrinal commitments. Of course, Putnam opposes this view, not because of doubts about the reality of mind-independent objects (which Putnam, like and in accordance with Kant, endorses) but precisely because of the language we humans must use to *characterize* the totality of mind-independent objects and *our* knowledge of that totality. Putnam describes the opposing perspective this way:

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*pedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2011), [plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/platonism-mathematics/](http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/platonism-mathematics/).

31. Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, 49.

I shall refer to it as the *internalist* perspective. It is characteristic of this view to hold that *what objects does the world consist of?* is a question it only makes sense to ask *within* a theory or description. Most "internalist" philosophers, though not all, hold further that there is more than one "true" theory or description of the world. . . . There is no God's Eye point of view that we can know or usefully imagine; there are only the various points of view of actual persons reflecting various interests and purposes that their descriptions and theories subserve.<sup>32</sup>

As in so much analytic philosophy, note that the status of objects and our relation to them plays a central role in Putnam's writing, here from a classic 1981 text that is one of the most-cited monographs in the analytical canon.

The problem for Meillassoux is that he continually and unreflectively assumes not the *existence* of a noumenal realm—as we have seen, since Kant such a metaphysical postulate has been philosophically acceptable, to at least a substantial group of practicing philosophers—but *our* true, direct, and absolute *access* to it. These are different questions; one is metaphysical, and it is this question that Meillassoux so often claims to be pursuing, while denying the plain assertions of so many philosophers to endorse the doctrine (the existence of the external world regardless of human access to it); but the other is epistemological, and it is on these lines that Meillassoux fails so often to deliver on his promises.

Thus Meillassoux typically offers purportedly anticorrelationist formulas like "The mathematizable properties of the object . . . are effectively in the object *in the way in which I conceive them*, whether I am in relation with this object or not" (AF, 3; emphasis added); writes of "that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not; that outside *which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling* of being on foreign territory" (AF, 7; emphasis added); and asks, "What is it that permits mathematical *discourse to bring to light* experiments whose material informs us about a world anterior to experience?" (AF, 26; emphasis added). In each case, and in many others like them, it is only by cursory reading that we can ignore the explicit invocations of human cognition that do not simply color but ground the nomi-

32. Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, 49–50.

nally metaphysical claims being made. Further, the philosophical sloppiness of such statements points exactly to what any careful critic, especially readers of Putnam and other philosophers who have written about the subject, must suspect: that despite his claim to decenter the human subject in favor of objectivity (ironic, given its overt disavowal of Heidegger and post-Heideggerian continental philosophy), Meillassoux is committed exactly to the establishment of a very powerful, very centered, and very absolute human subject, one typified exactly by the philosophical position from which Meillassoux writes, which is precisely that of the God's Eye view that Putnam works so hard to locate within realist doctrines, and to dispel.

Meillassoux's anthropocentric practice is not merely a subtle philosophical fault: it is a profound mistake at the core of his work, one that—because, unlike most proponents of realism in Anglo-American philosophy, Meillassoux refuses even to acknowledge the possibility that human perception might not provide perfect access to objective reality—ends up informing nearly all of the argumentative and conceptual work Meillassoux, and SR/OOO following him, claims to do. As David Berry has pointed out, at a very practical level, SR/OOO's claim to equalize the human with all other objects results in a “performative contradiction,” since while “it would be perfectly legitimate to outline a formalist theory or methodological position that, for the sake of the approach, limits the requirement to treat human actors as particular or special in relation to others, . . . it is quite another to then extend this claim into a philosophical system which is part of a special order of discourse particular to human beings, that is, *philosophy*.”<sup>33</sup> If we could make sense of the idea of nonhumans doing philosophy, and of that philosophy being of a sort both to be recognizable to humans as philosophy and yet not to be the same thing we call philosophy, the claim to have escaped the human orbit might deserve greater consideration. Meillassoux makes it sound as if it is prejudice to note that, so far as we know, only human beings engage in the specific disciplinary practice we call philosophy, and that human beings are inherently constrained by the conditions of our own existence (in ways we both do and do not understand) in our assessments of external reality—of which following Kant we can *neither* deny the existence *nor* claim to know its exact nature.

33. David M. Berry, “The Uses of Object-Oriented Ontology,” *Stunlaw: A Critical Review of Politics, Arts and Technology*, May 25, 2012, [stunlaw.blogspot.com/2012/05/uses-of-object-oriented-ontology.html](http://stunlaw.blogspot.com/2012/05/uses-of-object-oriented-ontology.html).

### The Return of the Human

Meillassoux ends *After Finitude* with a series of brief and obscure formulations that appear to indicate what would be at stake for a philosophical practice stripped of correlationist blinders. First, "we must establish the following thesis[:] . . . what is mathematically conceivable is absolutely possible" (AF, 126); second, he means to demonstrate "that the laws of nature derive their factual stability from a property of temporality that is itself absolute, which is to say, from a property of time that is indifferent to our existence, viz., that of the non-totalizability of its possibilities," a matter "of deriving the absolute and now unconditionally necessary scope of a particular theorem, viz., the theorem that allows us to maintain the non-totalizability of the transfinite" (AF, 127)—in both cases, characteristically and explicitly invoking human existence and cognition even as he claims to have put them aside. "Our only aim," he writes, "has been to try to convince the reader not only that it is possible to rediscover thought's absolutizing scope, but that it is urgent that we do so, given the extent to which the divorce between science's Copernicanism and philosophy's Ptolemaism has become abyssal, regardless of all those denials that serve only to perpetuate this schism"—"thought's absolutizing scope" being again an epistemological rather than metaphysical concept, about human thought rather than escaping consideration of it. Meillassoux hopes nothing less than to "[wake] us from our correlationist slumber, by enjoining us to reconcile thought and absolute" (AF, 128)—despite the apparent cardinal sin of correlationism being its inability to sever the relation between thought and being, Meillassoux's goal is revealed explicitly as yoking them together.

When the "critique of correlationism" is invoked in SR/OOO writings, it is typically understood as a demonstration that almost all prior thought has been interested only in human beings, that this is some kind of not just conceptual but ethical-cum-political flaw, and that a new form of practice can be developed in which humans themselves are, or at least human access is, demoted in favor of a more egalitarian approach to the stuff of the world.<sup>34</sup> Yet Meillassoux's profound lack of attention to the actual work of philosophers, literary theorists, and even scientists—itself significantly

34. I am thus very sympathetic to the critique offered by Alexander Galloway, "A Response to Graham Harman's 'Marginalia on Radical Thinking,'" *An und für sich*, June 3, 2012, [itself.wordpress.com/2012/06/03/a-response-to-graham-harmans-marginalia-on-radical-thinking/](http://itself.wordpress.com/2012/06/03/a-response-to-graham-harmans-marginalia-on-radical-thinking/), and his "The Poverty of Philosophy: Realism and Post-Fordism," *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 2 (2013): 347–66.

disturbing for a philosophy that claims to be getting in closer touch with objects than have previous schools but that is unable even to perform this operation on the material it should know the most about—means that he continually fails to make good on these promises and fails to avoid the conceptual and practical traps philosophers have uncovered in the very issues he claims to be championing. By failing to read carefully in metaphysics or epistemology and to respect their procedures, SR/OOO confines its litanies of objects to those perceptible and knowable by human beings, despite the clear consequences even of Kant's philosophy that the universe must in fact be full of objects about which human beings know little if anything (exactly the position that in some modes SR/OOO appears to recommend) and that the ones about which we do know come in a variety of kinds. In claiming to decenter the human, but in "enjoining us to reconcile thought and absolute," Meillassoux achieves the opposite effect, putting the human knower at the center of a universe to which he or she has perfect access, a Ptolemaic Earth around whom everything revolves.<sup>35</sup>

At least in some of its instances, SR/OOO offers itself as a program of not just metaphysical but ethical import, and some of its main figures at times write as if one of our world's current major problems is our failure to take seriously enough the concerns of nonhuman (and even nonliving) objects. Here, too, the failure to engage with the many varieties of materialist political and literary theory that deal with the stuff of the world is of serious concern, for the varieties of "thing theory," material culture, and ecological approaches to criticism appear to have been engaged in just such practices and must be written out for SR/OOO's global critique to take hold. Like Meillassoux's paradoxical human de- and recentering, such institutional practices end up installing the SR/OOO writers as *having* some kind

35. In Anglo-American philosophy the discussion of objects has been widespread and persistent since the early 1900s, and SR/OOO's almost complete inattention to this material is one of the most concerning and symptomatic features of its practice. Almost unmentioned in SR/OOO are influential general works wherein objects figure prominently, such as W. V. Quine's *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960); and Brian Cantwell-Smith's *On the Origin of Objects* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998). There is also no engagement with analytic work on mereology, the study of parts, wholes, and the metaphysics of objects in general. Among prominent contemporary studies in this field, see Kathrin Koslicki, *The Structure of Objects* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); David Lewis, *Parts of Classes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); and Peter Simons, *Parts: A Study in Ontology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). To my knowledge there is also no sustained discussion in SR/OOO of analytic metaphysics of the sort associated with David Armstrong and David Lewis.



of privileged or special access denied to other thinkers for reasons none of the SR/OOO writers can articulate. Meillassoux condemns thinkers from across the spectrum of human activities for their egocentrism, yet its actual practice suggests that this is exactly how Meillassoux wants his audiences to see his own work, while he repeatedly fails to demonstrate that egocentrism in his targets. Among the most concerning effects of his writing is to discourage students from reading in the philosophical tradition works that directly address the questions in which they seem interested.

The project SR/OOO and Meillassoux take as their starting point, Kant's project, was never intended solely as metaphysics or epistemology. For Kant it connected directly to questions of how human beings ought to live. Kant wrote the first *Critique* in part to enable to completion of the second, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, but the second *Critique* goes largely unmentioned in Meillassoux and in SR/OOO. Kant used the impact of scientific inquiry on rational conceptual practice to argue against the relevance to humans of an absolute realm not of mathematics but of a Supreme Being whose existence determines the right course for human action: "Without a God and a world invisible to us now but hoped for, the glorious ideas of morality are indeed objects of approval and admiration, but not springs of purpose and action" (A813/B841). Human beings—or more generally, rational actors—are "special" precisely because we are free to act in a way that other (nonfree) actors are not. This may be construed as conferring on us privileges, but to Kant it confers something much more like responsibility. This responsibility is one we can only conceive of in the human context or in that of other rational beings. To deny this fundamental thrust of Kantian philosophy is to suggest that we bear no such responsibility, that we are free to pick and choose which parts of our experience we consider worthy of the ethical imperative Kant calls categorical, that we might decide not merely that wooden posts, marbles, and iPhones are worthy of the same ethical care due to other humans, but that other humans might well not be. If there is one feature of a Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy that is widely shared and that we consider abandoning only at our own peril, it is this one.