

SECOND EDITION

QUENTIN MEILLASSOUX

PHILOSOPHY IN THE MAKING



GRAHAM HARMAN

Quentin Meillassoux

Speculative Realism

Series Editor: Graham Harman

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Quentin Meillassoux

Philosophy in the Making

Second edition

Graham Harman

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Remark on Citations

Page references to works by Quentin Meillassoux appear in parentheses in the text itself, in the form of an abbreviation followed by a page number. For example, (AF 92) means page 92 of *After Finitude*. A key to the abbreviations of Meillassoux's works appears below, and full bibliographical information on these writings can be found in the list of Works Cited at the end of this book. References to works by all other authors appear as endnotes following each chapter.

Citations from Ray Brassier's translation of *After Finitude* appear courtesy of Continuum Publishing. Translated excerpts from the unpublished French manuscript of *L'Inexistence divine* (*The Divine Inexistence*) and the whole of the 'Interview with Quentin Meillassoux' appear courtesy of Meillassoux himself; both are published in the present work alone.

- AF = *After Finitude*
- BL = Berlin Lecture ('Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition')
- BM = 'Badiou and Mallarmé'
- CL = 'The Contingency of the Laws of Nature'
- DI = *The Divine Inexistence*
- DU = 'Decision and Undecidability of the Event in *Being and Event I* and *II*'
- HE = 'History and Event in Alain Badiou'
- IW = 'The Immanence of the World Beyond'
- MS = 'Metaphysics, Speculation, Correlation'
- NS = *The Number and the Siren*
- PV = 'Potentiality and Virtuality'
- QM = 'Interview with Quentin Meillassoux'
- SC = 'Subtraction and Contraction'
- SD = 'Spectral Dilemma'
- SR = 'Speculative Realism'

Series Editor's Preface

With this book, Edinburgh University Press launches a new series in Speculative Realism. The Speculative Realism movement began with a now famous April 2007 workshop at Goldsmiths College, University of London (see pp. 77–80 below). In the brief ensuing period it has taken on a life of its own, especially among younger participants in the blogosphere. Books in this series may be either admiring or critical, but all will explore the ramifications of speculative realism for philosophy and the numerous disciplines in which this young movement has already had an impact: anthropology, archaeology, architecture, English literature, feminism, the fine arts, Medieval studies, musicology, rhetoric and composition, science studies, and others.

Speculative realism is best understood as a loose umbrella term for a series of vastly different philosophical enterprises. What all have in common is their rejection of what Quentin Meillassoux first termed ‘correlationism’. Whereas realists assert the existence of a world independent of human thought and idealists deny such an autonomous world, correlationism adopts an apparently sophisticated intermediate position, in which human and world come only as a pair and cannot be addressed outside their mutual correlation. Accordingly, the dispute between realism and idealism is dismissed as a ‘pseudo-problem’. Inspired ultimately by Immanuel Kant, correlationists are devoted to the human-world correlate as the sole topic of philosophy, and this has become the unspoken central dogma of all continental and much analytic philosophy. Speculative realist thinkers oppose this credo (though not always for the same reasons) and defend a realist stance toward the world. But instead of endorsing a commonsensical, middle-aged realism of boring hands and billiard balls existing outside the mind, speculative realist philosophies are perplexed

by the *strangeness* of the real: a strangeness undetectable by the instruments of common sense.

Given that Meillassoux coined the central polemical term of speculative realism ('correlationism'), and given that his writings in English have been among the most popular works in this idiom so far, it is fitting that the first book in the series should be a study of his philosophy. Meillassoux was born in Paris in 1967, making him still a rather young philosopher. His debut book *After Finitude* (2006) had immediate and far-reaching impact, and his unpublished major work *L'Inexistence divine* (*The Divine Inexistence*) has been eagerly awaited for several years. I am pleased to report that the present book includes a 65-page appendix featuring translated excerpts from this unpublished but somewhat legendary work, which was written in 1997 and extensively revised in 2003.

Perhaps it is also fitting that I should be the author of this series-triggering book on Meillassoux's philosophy. He and I have worked in proximity for five years as original members of the speculative realist movement; moreover, we also have two of the most contrasting philosophies in the group. For Meillassoux, the familiar correlationist point that we cannot think a tree-in-itself without turning it into a tree-for-us is a powerful argument that must be overcome with delicate logical finesse; for me, it is a terrible argument from the start. For Meillassoux, the principle of sufficient reason must be abolished; for me, it is the basis of all ontology. For Meillassoux, only a commitment to immanence will save philosophy from superstition and irrationalism; for me, philosophies of immanence are a catastrophe. For Meillassoux, the human being remains a unique site of dignity and philosophical questioning, and marks a quantum leap from the pre-human realm; for me, humans differ only by degree from raindrops, dolphins, citrus fruit, and iron ore. My hope is that such contrasts have generated productive tensions in the book now before you. By reflecting on these tensions, the reader will be led into the midst of some of the most important internal debates of speculative realism. But there are other such debates, and as Series Editor I welcome proposals for books on all aspects of this new approach to philosophy.

Graham Harman
Cairo
February 2011

Preface to the Second Edition

Since the publication of the first edition of this book, interest in Meillassoux's philosophy has continued to grow, as has the amount of his work available in English. In the autumn of 2011 he published his second book, a sparkling study of the canonical French poet Stéphane Mallarmé, which is covered in Chapter 3 below. Meillassoux also made a significant career move in 2012, leaving his alma mater the École normale supérieure after many years of service for a new position as *Maître de conférences* at the Université Paris 1–Panthéon Sorbonne. This suggests that long-delayed recognition in his home country is finally beginning to arrive. There was even significant recognition in the art world, as in 2013 Meillassoux and his original Speculative Realist colleagues (Brassier, Grant, Harman) were ranked collectively by *ArtReview* as the eighty-first most powerful influence in the art world, the highest-rated philosophers on the list. In the meantime, Meillassoux's debut book *After Finitude* was either already translated or being translated into roughly a dozen languages. For this second edition I have made only minor stylistic changes to the text of the first edition. But I have also added a good deal of new material. An expanded Chapter 2 contains sections on various lectures and articles by Meillassoux not available at the time of the first edition. This is followed by a new Chapter 3, devoted exclusively to *The Number and the Siren*. The later chapters of the book have been renumbered accordingly.

Ankara
August 2014

Introduction

This is the first book-length treatment of the philosophy of Quentin Meillassoux (pronounced ‘may-yuh-sue’), an emerging French thinker of the greatest interest. Meillassoux was born in Paris in 1967, the son of the anthropologist Claude Meillassoux (1925–2005), a household name among Africanists.¹ The younger Meillassoux studied at the famed École Normale Supérieure on the rue d’Ulm, and taught at that institution for more than a decade until accepting a position at the Sorbonne in 2012. His debut book, *Après la finitude* (*After Finitude*), was officially published in early 2006,² though copies were sighted in Paris bookstores late the preceding year. Little time was needed for Meillassoux’s book to catch fire in Anglophone continental philosophy circles. In the words of Peter Hallward, a noted authority on recent French thought:

Not since [Jacques] Derrida’s ‘Structure, Sign and Play’ (1966) has a new French philosopher made such an immediate impact in sections of the Anglophone world . . . It’s easy to see why Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* has so quickly acquired something close to cult status among readers who share his lack of reverence for ‘the way things are.’³

Prominent among Meillassoux’s teachers was the philosopher Alain Badiou, whose preface to *After Finitude* displays breathtaking confidence in the book: ‘It would be no exaggeration to say that Quentin Meillassoux has opened up a new path in the history of philosophy . . . a path that circumvents Kant’s canonical distinction between “dogmatism”, “scepticism” and “critique”.’⁴ Hinting at Meillassoux’s larger unpublished work, Badiou adds that *After Finitude* is merely ‘a fragment from a particularly important . . . philosophical enterprise.’⁵ Slavoj Žižek tells us that

‘the philosopher who addressed [the status of materialism today] in the most appropriate way is Quentin Meillassoux in his *After Finitude*.’⁶ It is true that Badiou and Žižek share a number of points in common with Meillassoux’s position, and thus their neutrality might be questioned. But when Meillassoux was invited to discuss his book at a salon hosted by Bruno Latour, he impressed even those of a different philosophical stripe: ‘Meillassoux was great, three hours non-stop, I had to stop him! . . . He is a force of nature and yet very quiet and amiable . . . Everyone was greatly pleased and totally unconvinced!’⁷

Such ringing endorsements from some of the most celebrated thinkers of our time speak well of Meillassoux’s first book. Yet his greatest impact has undoubtedly been among the young. If one book has been treated as the central monument of the newest trends in Anglophone continental thought, by allies and critics alike, it is surely this recent import from Paris. Within a year of its French publication, *After Finitude* had catalyzed the formation of the Speculative Realism movement in philosophy, and given birth to an extensive corpus of blog posts devoted to the book. Despite his clarity as a writer and friendliness as a colleague, Meillassoux quickly became something of a mysterious intellectual figure, largely due to rumors concerning the massive unpublished philosophical system to which Badiou alluded: *L’Inexistence divine*, or *The Divine Inexistence*. But there is no mystery at all surrounding his key polemical term, which has already entered the philosophical lexicon in what feels like permanent fashion. I speak of ‘correlationism’, Meillassoux’s name for the dominant ontological background of the continental philosophy of the past century. Authors working in the continental tradition have generally claimed to stand beyond the traditional dispute between realism (‘reality exists outside our mind’) and idealism (‘reality exists only in the mind’). The correlationist alternative, so dominant that it is often left unstated by its adherents, is to assume that we can think neither of human without world nor of world without human, but only of a primordial correlation or rapport between the two. Despite its inability to think anything outside the correlate of human and world, correlationism denies being an idealist position. After all, one can always claim that extra-human reality is not being rejected in idealist fashion since humans are always already immersed in a world, or something in a similar vein.

The roots of correlationism are easiest to locate in the Critical Philosophy of Immanuel Kant (though Meillassoux now speaks of David Hume as the first correlationist), released to the public in the distant 1780s and 1790s, but still forming the horizon for most philosophy in 2010. Kant's position has two simple but major implications. The first is the basic finitude of human knowledge, which Meillassoux's title *After Finitude* openly abandons. According to Kant, we are unable to have knowledge of things-in-themselves, but are limited to reflecting on the transcendental conditions of our access to the world: space, time, and the twelve categories of the understanding. By contrast, Meillassoux tries to show that absolute knowledge is possible despite the claims of Kant and his correlationist heirs, Husserl and Heidegger prominent among them.

But there is a second implication of Kant's position that Meillassoux fully accepts. Like most post-Kantian thinkers, Meillassoux greatly appreciates Kant's critique of 'dogmatic' metaphysics, which attempts to make proclamations about the world as it is without a prior critique of our ability to know the world. The typical form of the correlationist argument in our time, which goes significantly further than Kant himself, says roughly this: 'If I try to think something beyond thought, this is a contradiction, for I have thereby turned it into a thought.' Meillassoux is alone among the original Speculative Realists in finding this argument to be so powerful as to be initially unassailable. In his view the correlational circle of human and world is not a trivial error or word game, but rather the starting point for all rigorous philosophy. We cannot make a pre-Kantian leap into some dogmatically described exterior of thought; instead, the correlate of thought and world must be radicalized from within. In other words, the next step in philosophy must be an 'inside job', and our human relation with the world always retains philosophical priority over the relation between inanimate objects, despite Meillassoux's attempted proof that there must be things independent of thought. The knowing human subject is something special in the world, and it makes no sense to speak only of a 'difference of degree' between human and non-human experience, in the manner of figures such as G. W. Leibniz, Alfred North Whitehead, and Gilles Deleuze. None the less, Meillassoux does not follow the Hegelian path of turning the human-world correlate into something absolute in its own right. Instead, he tries to drive a wedge midway between Kant's

position and Hegel's. Claiming that a position called 'strong correlationism' is possible, and describing how it differs from absolute idealism, Meillassoux then tries to radicalize strong correlationism into his own novel position: speculative materialism.

To summarize in reverse order, Kant holds as follows:

- a. The human–world relation stands at the center of philosophy, since we cannot think something without thinking it.
- b. All knowledge is finite, unable to grasp reality in its own right.

Meillassoux rejects (b) while affirming (a). But readers of my own books know that my reaction to Kant is the exact opposite, rejecting (a) while affirming (b), since in my philosophy the human–world relation does not stand at the center. Even inanimate objects fail to grasp each other as they are in themselves; finitude is not just a local specter haunting the human subject, but a structural feature of relations in general including non-human ones. Yet the present book is meant largely as an exposition of Meillassoux's philosophy, and most of the critical counterplay between his position and my own is concentrated in Chapter 4. Otherwise I will adopt the voice of an advocate for this remarkable new thinker, who has already galvanized an entire generation of admiring supporters and detractors.

It should now be clear who Quentin Meillassoux is, and why many readers see him as one of the most original philosophers working today. But a word is also in order about this book's subtitle: *Philosophy in the Making*. No one can predict what additional books by Meillassoux might have appeared fifty or even ten years from now. This makes it impossible to write about him in the same way that one writes of the deceased classic thinkers of yesteryear, or even of established living thinkers of advanced age. Instead of a completed philosophy, Meillassoux's is literally a philosophy in the making, a concept I borrow from the writings of Latour.⁸ In *Science and Action*⁹ Latour makes a distinction between 'ready-made science' and 'science in the making'. The former consists of established scientific facts, praised for their rationality in comparison with the night of ignorance that came before. Such established facts become 'black boxes' taken for granted and never opened, thereby concealing an intricate history and internal organization. As Latour puts it, 'the impossible task of opening the black box is made feasible (if not easy) by moving in time and space until

one finds the controversial topic on which scientists and engineers are busy at work.’¹⁰ In the present case, the timing of this book ensures that the Meillassoux black box is already open, since it has never yet been closed: there is currently no such thing as the completed philosophical *œuvre* of the forty-six-year-old Quentin Meillassoux. At the time of this writing (June 2014) we stand somewhere between the published *After Finitude* and the unpublished *The Divine Inexistence*, with other works undoubtedly still to come. Part of the excitement of the current study is that I am aware of no other in-depth account of a young philosopher in the midst of emergence. There is even the possibility, both intriguing and alarming, that the present book might have some effect on the ultimate shape of Meillassoux’s work. It is no longer possible to encourage Nietzsche in his loneliest hour or give feedback on the weaker arguments of St Thomas Aquinas; nor can they respond to their present-day critics from beyond the grave. By contrast, Meillassoux will be able to read and contest this book just like anyone else.

Notes

1. An enlightening obituary of the elder Meillassoux by Mahir Şaul, ‘Claude Meillassoux (1925–2005)’, can be found in the *American Anthropologist*, vol. 107, no. 4, December 2005, pp. 753–7.
2. Quentin Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*. Translated into English by Ray Brassier as *After Finitude*.
3. Peter Hallward, unpublished manuscript. Quoted with Hallward’s permission.
4. Alain Badiou, ‘Preface’, in Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. vii.
5. Ibid.
6. Slavoj Žižek, ‘An Answer to Two Questions’, in Adrian Johnston, Badiou, Žižek, and *Political Transformations: The Subject of Change*, p. 214.
7. Bruno Latour, personal communication, 21 February 2007.
8. Latour himself had borrowed the phrase from Alfred North Whitehead’s title, *Religion in the Making*, though in the present book I mean it in a thoroughly Latourian sense.
9. Bruno Latour, *Science in Action*.
10. Ibid., p. 4.

After Finitude

This chapter presents the main ideas of *After Finitude* (2006), the lucid and economical work that gave Quentin Meillassoux an immediate degree of fame in the Anglophone world. Here as elsewhere in the book, my summaries will inevitably be shaded by my own philosophical concerns. While Meillassoux and I have worked together in the context of the Speculative Realism movement, it is widely known that our intellectual differences are pronounced. I am none the less a passionate admirer of his philosophical imagination and argumentative audacity, and until Chapter 4 will try to keep my own views largely in the background. No one, however, can give a purely neutral survey of a philosopher, and my decisions about which aspects of Meillassoux's work are most important and most debatable will not be the same as anyone else's. Very different books about Meillassoux from this one are possible, and I hope competing accounts will soon appear. But from where I stand, there seem to be six ideas that function as pillars of *After Finitude* and of Meillassoux's philosophy as a whole. They are listed here in an order different from the author's own:

- A. The enemy is correlationism. But it must be overcome from within, not by simply dismissing it in a naïve realist manner.
- B. There is a position called strong correlationism that does not slip into the excesses of absolute idealism, and that can be radicalized into a new philosophy called speculative materialism.
- C. When strong correlationism is radicalized, it yields the truth that only one thing is necessary: contingency itself.
- D. The existence of a world *prior or posterior in time* to all human consciousness poses a greater intellectual challenge than the existence of things *spatially remote* from all

human consciousness. This is the theme of ‘diachronicity’, the expanded version of what Meillassoux initially calls ‘ancestrality’.

- E. The fact that natural laws are contingent does not require that they be unstable. This is where the transfinite mathematics of Georg Cantor enters Meillassoux’s philosophy, in a slightly different manner from how it enters that of Badiou.
- F. The distinction between primary and secondary qualities must be revived, and the primary qualities of a thing are those that can be mathematized.

Not only would Meillassoux present these themes in a different order, but he would also probably not even choose precisely these as the pillars of his book. In particular, Point D is one he would surely regard as somewhat trivial; it is not even addressed in the original French version of his book. But taken together, these six points are the basis for one of the most striking philosophies to have appeared in the young twenty-first century. They are also enough to place Meillassoux in a somewhat isolated position, since even his fellow Speculative Realists would agree with only the first half of Point 1 and either reject or ignore the others. His commitment to following his ideas wherever they lead brings him to the surprising doctrine of a hyper-chaotic world devoid of all necessity, in which the laws of nature can change at any moment for no reason whatever, and in which both ethics and politics hinge on a virtual God who has never existed but might exist in the future. This dazzling vision has brought Meillassoux countless admirers, but few if any literal disciples. For all the friendly clarity of his communication with readers, he is a thinker of rare solitude.

Correlationism

With his term ‘correlationism’, Meillassoux has already made a permanent contribution to the philosophical lexicon. The rapid adoption of this word, to the point that an intellectual movement has already assembled to combat the menace it describes, suggests that ‘correlationism’ describes a pre-existent reality that was badly in need of a name. Whenever disputes arise in philosophy concerning realism and idealism, we immediately note the appearance of a third personage who dismisses both of these alternatives as solutions to a pseudo-problem. This third figure is the correlationist,

who holds that we can never think of the world without humans nor of humans without the world, but only of a primal correlation or rapport between the two. As Meillassoux puts it, ‘the central notion of philosophy since Kant seems to be that of *correlation*. By “correlation” we mean 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’ (AF 5). And given that few people in our time wish to defend a full-blown idealism of the Berkeleyan variety, only one option remains: ‘every philosophy which disavows naïve realism has become a variant of correlationism’ (AF 5).

To a large extent, Meillassoux views this trend unfavorably. At the end of his book, he openly declares his goal of ‘waking us from our correlational slumber, by enjoining us to reconcile thought and absolute’ (AF 128). This critique of correlationism launches the strange adventure of Meillassoux’s philosophy. As simple as the concept may seem, it has already met with numerous misunderstandings, and hence should be discussed in some detail. The first point to be made is that correlationism is not a ‘straw man’, as numerous critics in mainstream continental philosophy have lazily asserted. The reason this concept has had such explosive force in continental circles since 2006, among both admirers and detractors, is precisely because the supremacy of the human–world correlate has long been the unspoken central dogma of these circles. Among analytic philosophers there has always been a respected and vigorous realist tradition, but in continental thought it was only in the early 1990s (by Maurizio Ferraris in Turin) that realist positions were openly defended, though even now they remain in the minority. Among continentals the debate between realism and idealism is still viewed, in the manner established by Husserl and Heidegger, as a pointless pseudo-problem. What one defends instead is the primordial interplay of human and world: whether that of thought and object (Husserl) or *Dasein* and *Sein* (Heidegger). But this is precisely what Meillassoux means by correlationism. While Husserl and Heidegger bequeathed numerous treasures to present-day philosophy, they shed little light on the autonomous reality of beings outside human thought.

But the second point to notice is that Meillassoux’s use of ‘correlationism’ is not solely polemical. More specifically, he *does not* attack the human–world correlate in the name of a return to old-fashioned realism, despite the frequent and understand-

able misreading of his remarks on ‘ancestrality’ in that manner. Unlike Alfred North Whitehead, who openly declares that ‘in the main [my philosophy] is a recurrence to pre-Kantian modes of thought,’¹ Meillassoux has no wish to be pre-Kantian. Indeed, he is highly sympathetic to Kant’s critique of pre-1780s metaphysics as ‘dogmatic’. When the objection is made to realism that we cannot think the unthought without turning it into a thought, for Meillassoux this is a crushing objection that needs to be craftily addressed by argument, not just an annoying word trick, as many classical realists hold.

And this is the third point that should be noted at the outset: Meillassoux wants to show that correlationism can be radicalized from within so as to yield absolute knowledge of things independent from us, while also avoiding the absolutization of thought found in German Idealism. For Meillassoux, there is always something outside human thought, and this something is purely contingent. Through precision labors that resemble the work of a gem cutter (to use Levi Bryant’s description), he builds a new philosophy of the absolute by starting from the apparently devastating limits of correlationism.

But a fourth and final point must also be noted: the correlate has at least two distinct features, and Meillassoux rejects only one of them. In one sense the correlate entails a limit on human knowledge; in another, it grants a special philosophical privilege to the human–world relation over the relation between any other things. As the very title *After Finitude* indicates, what bothers Meillassoux about correlationism is its claim that we have no access to the absolute. By contrast, the other aspect of correlationism does not bother Meillassoux at all, though it lies at the very root of Whitehead’s rejection of Kant: the special status of human knowledge of the world compared with how animal or inanimate entities interact among themselves and with other entities. To call Meillassoux a Hegelian would be a plausible oversimplification; to call him a Whiteheadian would simply be ridiculous.

None the less, for Meillassoux there are enough negative aspects to correlationism to keep his polemical side occupied for most of the book. While the traditional debate between philosophers revolved around the question of who has the best model of substance, since Kant this has shifted to a dispute over who has identified the true nature of the human–world correlate: ‘is it the thinker of the subject–object correlation, the noetico–noematic

correlation, or the language–referent correlation? The question is no longer “which is the proper substrate,” but “which is the proper correlate?” (AF 5). As Meillassoux observes, the quarrel between analytic and continental philosophy might easily be understood as a disagreement over whether language or consciousness is the best model of the correlate. Heidegger’s replacement of consciousness and world by *Dasein* and *Sein* changes little, since being is still made the correlate of a human who is open to its mystery, to the point that it makes no sense for Heidegger to ask whether or not being could exist without humans. Meillassoux refers to this dominance of the correlational circle in a spirit of horror, calling it ‘the Kantian catastrophe’ (AF 124). He rightly adds that despite Kant’s famous claim to have performed a ‘Copernican Revolution’ in philosophy, he is actually guilty of the opposite: a ‘Ptolemaic Counter-Revolution’ (AF 118). For whereas Copernicus removed humans from the center of the world by putting the earth in motion, Kant’s insistence that reality revolves around the conditions of our knowing it makes a better match with Ptolemy’s ancient geocentric astronomy. At the precise historical moment when science was leaping forward and seizing the absolute, Kant enslaved philosophy to a model of finitude that still dominates philosophy today. Yet despite this considerable downside of Kant’s legacy, ‘we cannot go back to being metaphysicians, just as we cannot go back to being dogmatists. On this point, we cannot but be the heirs of Kantianism’ (AF 29). As he had already put it a few pages earlier: ‘We must bear in mind the apparently unanswerable force of the correlationist circle (contrary to the naïve realist)’ (AF 27). The absolute that Meillassoux so passionately wants to restore cannot be attained by leaping beyond finitude and dogmatically grasping an external reality conceived in naïve fashion, but only through the inside job of radicalizing the correlational circle from within, forcing it to yield secrets of the absolute that we never imagined were there.

Meillassoux’s ambivalent feelings toward correlationism must be kept in mind as we consider his famous theme of ‘ancestrality’. The topic arises early in the book through a brief time line that evokes the fleeting lifespan of humans in the history of the cosmos. The origin of the universe was 13.5 billion years ago; the formation of the earth, 4.56 billion years; the origin of life on earth was just 3.5 billion years before the present time; and *Homo habilis*, our johnny-come-lately cousin from Tanzania, is a mere

2 million years old (AF 9). Since the 1930s, scientific techniques have enabled us to determine the age of both fossils and starlight, thereby placing many entities at a date far older than all possible sentient observers. On this basis, Meillassoux points to a difficulty confronting the correlationist, who wants to view reality as a human–world correlate, but is now faced with scientific discourse about a reality that *precedes* any possibility of such a correlate. And here he introduces his two key terms for referring to such a reality: ‘ancestrality’ and the ‘arche-fossil’. In his own words:

I will call ‘ancestral’ any reality anterior to the emergence of the human species – or even anterior to every recognized form of life on earth . . . I will call ‘arche-fossil’ . . . materials indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event; one that is anterior to terrestrial life. (AF 10)

Admittedly, this reference to ancestrality and the arche-fossil is not an unanswerable blow to the correlationist position. The correlationist can still counterattack as follows: the statement that ‘the earth was formed 4.56 billion years ago’ can be rewritten as saying that ‘the earth was formed 4.56 billion years ago *for us*.’ Although Meillassoux finds such objections wrong, he hardly finds them laughable. His appeal to the ancestral in *After Finitude* is not a ‘proof’ of realism in the naïve or dogmatic fashion, but is meant more in the spirit of an *aporia*. The problem for correlationism is that it cannot give a *literal* interpretation of scientific statements. For ‘no variety of correlationism, no matter how vehemently it insists that it should not be confused with subjective idealism *à la Berkeley*, can admit that this statement’s literal meaning is also its deepest meaning’ (AF 122). And as Meillassoux puts it, if we ‘suppose for a moment that the realist . . . interpretation harboured the key to the ultimate meaning of the ancestral statement [we] would then be obliged to maintain what can only appear to the post-critical philosopher as a tissue of absurdities’ (AF 14). Among these supposed absurdities are the following ‘naïve’ ideas: being is not co-extensive with its appearance to us; what exists is temporally prior to its appearance to us; human sentience and cognition arose at a certain point in the history of the universe that might even be accurately dated.

All these notions are basic pillars of common sense and of natural science alike. Yet they make a dramatic contrast with the

correlationist vision, whose defenders can easily heap scorn on common sense, but must respond to the natural sciences with a mixture of prudence and tenacity. Among correlationists, ‘a philosopher will generally begin with an assurance to the effect that his theories in no way interfere with the work of the scientist.’ However, ‘he will immediately add (or say to himself): [scientific research is] legitimate, *as far as it goes*’ (AF 13). The literal claim that the earth dates to 4.56 billion years ago must give way to a second, more sophisticated interpretation of this statement. We have seen that, instead of saying the earth is 4.56 billion years older than humans, the correlationist says that the earth is 4.56 billion years older than humans – *for humans*. No matter how skilled the sciences become at dating pre-human entities, the correlationist always has the trump card of turning all ancestral dates into dates *for us*. Despite Meillassoux’s considerable sympathy for the correlationist argument, he dismisses these procedures with acid tones. We know of fundamentalist Christians who insist on the Biblical verdict that the world is only 6,000 years old, and who interpret scientific evidence to the contrary as God’s way of testing our faith in the Bible. ‘Similarly,’ Meillassoux mocks, ‘might not the meaning of the arche-fossil be to test the philosopher’s faith in correlation, even when confronted with data which seem to point to an abyssal divide between what exists and what appears?’ (AF 18). Correlationists do indeed *claim* that they are not merely trapped in a human interior, when they ‘readily [insist] upon the fact that consciousness, like language, enjoys an originary connection to a radical exteriority (exemplified by phenomenological consciousness . . . transcending toward the world)’ (AF 7). But Meillassoux rightly calls this supposed exteriority ‘a transparent cage’, and notes that in this way ‘contemporary philosophers have lost the *great outdoors*, the *absolute* outside of pre-critical thinkers . . . that outside which was not relative to us . . . existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not’ (AF 7).

Later in the book, the theme of ancestry expands into that of ‘diachronicity’, which no longer includes only events preceding human life, but those following the possible extinction of intelligent species as well. After all, ‘the problem of the arche-fossil is not confined to ancestral statements . . . [but rather] concerns every discourse whose meaning includes a *temporal discrepancy* between thinking and being’ (AF 112). Eventually we need to ask why a temporal discrepancy is more important for Meillassoux

than the spatial discrepancy between human observers and unwitnessed events in distant galaxies and abandoned houses. But clearly, the post-human universe raises the same problems as the pre-human cosmos: just as we ask about the formation of the earth a billion or more years before the rise of terrestrial life, we can also ask about ‘the climatic and geological consequences of a meteor impact extinguishing all life on earth’ (AF 112). It should be noted that for Meillassoux diachronicity is not a matter of fact, but of possibility. After all, it *could* happen that human life will endure forever along with the universe as a whole. And it even *could* be the case that human life was present from the time of the Big Bang. ‘Science could in principle have discovered a synchronicity between humanity and world, since there is nothing to rule out *a priori* . . . the hypothesis of a human species as old as the cosmos’ (AF 113). But even if this were the case, we could still raise the problem of diachronicity as a hypothetical scenario. We would still be able to speculate: *what if* our human ancestors were not as old as the universe itself? Would the human–world correlate then be threatened? Even in a world without genuine arche-fossils, they would live on as a valuable thought experiment in the same way as the ‘possible worlds’ scenarios of analytic philosophers like David Lewis.

We now have a sense of what Meillassoux intends with his valuable term ‘correlationism’. Dogmatic realists claim that a world exists outside our thinking of it, and the much smaller group of absolute idealists denies any such world outside the mind. By contrast, the correlationist philosophies prevailing since Kant view ‘realism vs. idealism’ as a basically worthless dispute, and claim to occupy a more sophisticated middle ground: we can neither think the world apart from humans, nor humans apart from the world, but only these two poles in co-existence. While Meillassoux attacks correlationism, he does so only in part. His goal is not to replace the human–world correlate either with traditional realism or full-blown idealism: far from it, since he views Kant and correlationism as a rigorous forward step in the history of philosophy. If Meillassoux views Kant as a ‘catastrophe’, this is not out of nostalgia for the olden times of dogmatic metaphysics, which he explicitly and repeatedly denounces. Instead, the nature of the Kantian disaster is confined to a single word found in the title of his book: *finitude*. What Meillassoux seeks is a non-dogmatic version of the absolute, one that arises internally from the ashes

of the correlational circle. If we arrange philosophies along a primitive three-term spectrum of *realist* – *correlationist* – *idealist*, the second of these is where Meillassoux sets up camp. But once he has done so, he immediately proclaims a new philosophy.

Speculative Materialism

Instead of remaining with the aforementioned threefold schema of realism, correlationism, and idealism, Meillassoux offers a subtler range of positions. The following list is important enough for the argument of *After Finitude* that it needs to be given a name for future reference. Let us call it ‘Meillassoux’s Spectrum’, a list arranged from most to least classically realist in spirit:

- Dogmatic/Naïve Realism
- Weak Correlationism
- Strong Correlationism
- Very Strong Correlationism
- Absolute Idealism.

Most of these positions already existed well before 2006, though often under different names. Meillassoux’s own Speculative Materialist philosophy is not yet included, but will emerge from a specific point in the list. Above all, his appeal to ancestry and the arche-fossil should not be mistaken for Position 1: dogmatic/naïve realism. Meillassoux is fully appreciative of the Kantian revolution in philosophy, despite the dark note of Kant’s hymn to finitude. The best description of Meillassoux’s strategy is that he initially places himself in Position 4: Very Strong Correlationism, working carefully to show that such a position can be maintained without collapsing into Position 5: Absolute Idealism. But rather than simply adopt Position 4, he turns it upside-down into a standpoint never known before, and which he calls Speculative Materialism.

In this section I will sketch the main features of these five positions, and show how Meillassoux hopes to escape the schema altogether. But first, we should dispense with some possible objections to it. One objection would claim that the Spectrum misses any number of possible intermediate positions; from experience, it seems that anywhere from three to seven new options are demanded by those who wish to one-up the Spectrum. The

proper response to this objection is simply to note that seventy or even three hundred subtle new variants might also be added if one wished, without thereby proving that the added nuance is of relevance to Meillassoux's argument. In short, Meillassoux does not claim that these are the only possible human attitudes towards the realism/idealism question, but only that they are the most important variants for clarifying his own Speculative Materialism by way of contrast. He is not trying to write an encyclopedia of all possible philosophies, only trying to develop a specific philosophical standpoint and distinguish it from its neighbors.

Another possible objection would lament the 'linear' character of the Spectrum, with the implication that philosophies are much too complicated to be laid out along a one-dimensional number line. This objection is well founded, but in the present context it is quite irrelevant. True enough, there is no way to arrange such diverse modern thinkers as Deleuze, Fichte, Gadamer, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty along a single linear co-ordinate system, given the vast range of subjects all of them address. But notice that it would be quite easy to arrange these thinkers in linear fashion if we did so according to available data on height, cholesterol count, or age at death. The point is that the linear ranking of *anything* becomes possible as soon as we focus on just one criterion. And thus it is in no way difficult to arrange philosophers in linear fashion according to how closely they approximate the classically realist version of the human-world relationship. This is precisely what Meillassoux's Spectrum does, for a limited but highly valuable purpose.

As we have seen, Meillassoux generally views correlationism as a *bad* thing. He introduces the term in a polemical spirit, and recommends that the correlationist model of philosophy be rejected. Yet the alternative he proposes is not a return to naïve realism of the pre-Kantian type. For in one sense it is true that ancestrality makes it 'incumbent upon us to break with the ontological requisite of the moderns, according to which *to be is to be a correlate*', since 'our task consists in trying to understand how thought is able to access the uncorrelated, which is to say, a world capable of subsisting without being given' (AF 28). Rather than following Kant's gesture of asking how synthetic judgments *a priori* are possible, Meillassoux asks as follows: 'what is the condition that legitimates science's ancestral statements?' (AF 27). And this question 'demands of us that we remain as distant from naïve realism

as from correlationist subtlety, which are *the two ways of refusing to see ancestry as a problem*' (AF 27). None the less, if forced to choose between naïve realism and correlationism, Meillassoux would embrace 'the apparently unanswerable force of the correlationist circle (contrary to the naïve realist)' (AF 27). We thus leave naïve realism behind for much the same reason as did Kant himself.

But like the German Idealists before him, Meillassoux is inclined to see a problem with thinking the things-in-themselves. This becomes clear from his next distinction, between 'a "weak" model [of correlationism], which is that of Kant, and a "strong" model, which seems to be dominant today, even if it is never thematized as such' (AF 30). The difference between the two forms should be clear enough. It is well known that while Kant's philosophy is based on our inability to know the things-in-themselves, he at least allows us to *think* them. By contrast, Meillassoux says, 'the strong model of correlationism maintains not only that it is illegitimate to *know* the in-itself, but *also* that it is illegitimate to claim that we can at least *think* it' (AF 35). Kant holds that we are able to make a few definite claims about the in-itself, such as that contradiction is impossible. But 'by what miraculous operation is Kantian thought able to get outside of itself in order to verify that what is unthinkable for us is impossible in itself?' (AF 35). For Meillassoux at this stage of the argument, non-contradiction 'can only be the norm for what is thinkable by us, rather than for what is possible in an absolute sense' (AF 40–1). And thus strong correlationism (which Meillassoux finds more formidable than the weak version) holds that irrational discourses about the absolute cannot be discounted (AF 41). In other words, for strong correlationism '*it is unthinkable that the unthinkable be impossible*' (AF 41). We simply cannot say anything at all about what lies outside thought. And here 'the strong model . . . 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' (AF 41). For the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, the structure of the world can only be 'shown' in a way 'that cannot be bound by the categories of science or logic' (AF 41). And for Heidegger, 'the very fact that there are beings, and that there is a givenness of beings' (AF 42) lies beyond all rational access.

Meillassoux has much to say about this strong correlationist position, and most of it is bad. Strong correlationism is linked with

numerous distasteful trends in the contemporary world: fideism, skepticism, fanaticism, and the return of the religious in general. In so far as strong correlationism thinks no rational statement about the in-itself is possible, it leads directly to fideism: 'fideism is merely the *other name* for strong correlationism' (AF 48), as seen in the mystical leanings of Wittgenstein and the theological tendencies of Heidegger. All possibility of rational discourse about the in-itself has ended: 'What philosopher nowadays would claim to have refuted the possibility of the Christian Trinity on the grounds that he had detected a contradiction in it?' (AF 43). Though it might seem that recent criticisms of metaphysics would also entail a critique of religion, the opposite has happened. For while it is true that specific metaphysical systems have been toppled to the ground by recent philosophy, this procedure has merely opened up a vast space of the unknowable in-itself, untouchable by reason. The results are predictable:

by destroying metaphysics, one has effectively rendered it impossible for a particular religion to use a pseudo-rational argumentation against every other religion. But in doing so – and this is the decisive point – one has inadvertently justified belief's claim to be the *only* means of access to the absolute. (AF 45–6)

As a result, 'even atheism . . . is reduced to a mere belief, and hence to a religion, albeit of the nihilist kind' (AF 46).

For Meillassoux, fideism goes hand in hand with skepticism. Against the frequent tendency to interpret religious fideism as a devious mask that conceals skeptical irreligiosity, Meillassoux holds that 'scepticism [is] an authentic fideism, which is dominant today, but in a form . . . *that has shrugged off every particular obedience to a determinate belief system*' (AF 46). Historically speaking, fideism 'was initiated by the Counter-Reformation, and Montaigne was its founding father' (AF 46). Indeed, Montaigne is a towering figure in Meillassoux's version of the history of philosophy, in some respects more important than Descartes as a founder of modern thought.² More generally, Meillassoux laments that while Greek philosophy once rationalized religion, religion is now used to derationalize philosophy (AF 47). Philosophy is subordinated to piety, and has become the voluntary handmaid of religion. Though it might seem that philosophy has been liberated from all religious pressures, 'it now considers itself to be the liberal

servant of any theology whatsoever, including an atheology' (AF 47). Religious notions are no longer condemned for their *falsity*, since the question of truth has shifted entirely to the realm of belief. Instead, we have entered a moralized space in which 'the condemnation of fanaticism is carried out solely in the name of its practical (ethico-political) consequences, never in the name of the ultimate falsity of its contents' (AF 47). But rather than viewing fanaticism as the crude, primitive remnant of a pre-rational era, Meillassoux sees it as the very *product* of Western critical reason: 'It is thanks to the critical power of correlationism that dogmatism was effectively vanquished in philosophy, and it is because of correlationism that philosophy finds itself incapable of fundamentally distinguishing itself from fanaticism.' In short, 'the victorious critique of ideologies has been transformed into a renewed argument for blind faith' (AF 49). Western thought is now obliged to pursue the same balancing act found in Meillassoux's own philosophy: the need to avoid the extremes of (a) dogmatic contact with a metaphysical in-itself and (b) the fanatical skepticism of belief, as embodied by 'the pretensions of those who would present themselves as its privileged trustees, solely by virtue of some revelation' (AF 49).

We now return to Meillassoux's Spectrum, a term never used by the author himself, but still a good name for the gradation of positions he describes. Already we have mentioned naïve/dogmatic realism, weak correlationism, and strong correlationism. With each step in the series so far, Meillassoux becomes increasingly sympathetic to the position described, while remaining somewhat dissatisfied. We should also note a further distinction between two separate forms of strong correlationism described by Meillassoux. Since he does not name them, I will take the liberty of calling them Strong Correlationism and Very Strong Correlationism. The difference between the two is as follows. The Very Strong Correlationist takes it for granted that the de-absolutization of thought also results in de-universalization, so that each person becomes a sort of private fideist with a personal worldview impenetrable to reason. By contrast, the simple Strong Correlationists 'situate themselves as heirs of Kant's critical legacy'. Hence they will 'attempt . . . to uncover the universal conditions for our relation to the world, whether these be construed as conditions for empirical science, conditions for linguistic communication between individuals, conditions for the perception of the entity, etc.' (AF 42).

The Very Strong Correlationists are found among postmodern philosophers. They ‘dismiss every variety of universal as a mystificatory relic of the old metaphysics [and] will claim that it is necessary to think the facticity of our relation to the world in terms of a *situation that is itself finite*’. And thus the correlation in which we find ourselves has no universal features, but is ‘anchored in a determinate era of the history of being, or in a form of life harbouring its own language-games, or in a determinate cultural and interpretive community, etc.’ (AF 43). Although many different authors could be cited as examples of the Strong and Very Strong positions, it is most helpful to cite the shift from Husserl to Heidegger as an example of the turn from Strong to Very Strong. For Very Strong Correlationism, the correlate is marked by its *facticity*. And though Meillassoux will soon reject this notion in the name of the related and startling idea of ‘factiality’, Very Strong Correlationism turns out to be his preferred starting point on the Spectrum: the point at which he attempts to radicalize the correlate from within. But first, there remains a further shift along the list of options, and it is one that Meillassoux would not quite endorse: Absolute Idealism. We will approach this topic slowly, through a reflection on how the correlationist deals with science.

As a general rule, correlationism is careful not to denigrate the sciences openly: ‘where science is concerned, philosophers have become modest – and even prudent’ (AF 13). Philosophers assure us that their theories ‘in no way interfere with the work of the scientist, and that the manner in which the latter understands her own research is perfectly legitimate’ (AF 13). None the less, we have seen that they always want to one-up the sciences by treating their literal statements about the ancestral world as circumscribed by a deeper philosophical sense – a sense in which events that occurred billions of years ago only occurred billions of years ago *for us*. According to this attitude, ‘although it is normal, and even natural, for the scientist to adopt a spontaneously realist attitude, which she shares with the “ordinary man”, the philosopher possesses a specific type of knowledge which imposes a correction upon science’s ancestral statements’ (AF 13). Thus there seems to be a safe division of labor: science does the work of naïve realism and achieves amazing results; correlationist philosophy watches this work from an ironic distance with condescending praise and a gently raised eyebrow, never so gullible as to accept scientific realism in literal fashion.

But this leads us to the very paradox with which Meillassoux's book began. We ask the correlationist the following question: 'What is it that happened 4.56 billion years ago? Did the accretion of the earth happen, yes or no?' (AF 16, emphasis removed). The correlationist now tries to play a double game, conceding that in some way the statement is 'true', while also denying its *literal* sense. But this is meaningless for Meillassoux, who sees no point in a positivist or verificationist understanding of science. The literal sense of scientific statements is that they point to a real world outside its accessibility to us: 'Science does not experiment with a view to validating the universality of its experiments; it carries out repeatable experiments with a view to external referents which endow these experiments with meaning' (AF 17). In short, there can be no subtle middle ground between the claim that a world existed billions of years before the appearance of thought and the opposite claim that world and thought exist only as correlates of one another. Thus, 'the correlationist should stop being modest and dare to assert openly that he is in a position to provide the scientist with an *a priori* demonstration that the latter's claims are *illusory*' (AF 17).

This brings us to a colorful interlude that is actually somewhat perilous for Meillassoux's argument. For given that correlationism cannot be reconciled with literal ancestral statements, it follows that '[when] confronted with the arche-fossil, *every variety of idealism converges and becomes equally extraordinary* – every variety of correlationism is exposed as an extreme idealism' (AF 18). Or as he had put it earlier:

it is as if the distinction between transcendental idealism – the idealism that is (so to speak) urbane, civilized, and reasonable – and speculative or even subjective idealism – the idealism that is wild, uncouth, and rather extravagant – it is as if this distinction . . . which separates Kant from Berkeley . . . became blurred and dissolved in light of the fossil-matter. (AF 17–18)

In other words, we now sense the real danger that correlationism is entirely indistinguishable from absolute idealism. And this would be a disaster for Meillassoux's book, for we will see that his own position makes sense only as a radicalization of the correlationist position, not as a variant of absolute idealism. Meillassoux's attempt to dismantle a flawed portion of the correlationist