Factuality and the Beyond of God: Attempt at an Inversion of Meillassoux's Speculative Materialism

Sandra Lehmann

Webster Vienna Private University/University of Kassel
E-mail: sandra.lehmann@univie.ac.at

Abstract

This article stages the confrontation of two approaches to thinking the absolute. On the one hand, it discusses Quentin Meillassoux's speculative materialism. In suggesting that there is no ultimate ground of being and that only contingency is necessary, Meillassoux takes the notion of the irreducible character of the absolute to its extreme and aporetic consequences. By contrast, I will outline an alternative account of the absolute. Like Meillassoux, I will suggest that the question of the absolute is intrinsically linked to the question of factuality. Yet, in this case, factuality leads to the notion of the beyond of God as the ground of being, inscribing into being the dynamic of a continuous inner transcendence.

Keywords: factuality, transcendence, philosophy of existence, the absolute, Quentin Meillassoux, speculative materialism

Introduction

Between theological concerns and recent attempts at developing a "speculative realist" or "speculative materialist" philosophy there are significant and unexpected affinities. For the latter reject any claim to either the primacy of the human or the existence of a specific human capacity (e.g. reason, language, the body) and maintain that being is in no way determined by finite subjectivity. As a result, theoretical accounts of being no longer have subjectivity as either their object, origin or end. Here subjectivity is replaced by an absolute that is self-sufficient and corresponds, at least formally, to the God of the metaphysical tradition, be it that of the Greek eternal cosmos or the creator God of monotheism.

Among the new speculative thinkers, it is Quentin Meillassoux who has carried out the most sustained discussion of the question of God. Especially relevant here is his 2006 essay *After Finitude* (the English edition appeared in 2008),[1] as well as his unpublished doctoral thesis from 1997, *L'inexistence divine*, of which *After Finitude* is an expanded version. Meillassoux's work is driven by two powerful motives, one negative, the other positive — *against* a certain Kantian and post-Kantian tradition's dichotomy between reason and faith; *for* an ontological approach that removes human subjectivity from the center of being in order to regain access to the absolute dimension of being. The former he refers to as "fideism," the latter has as its methodological starting point what he calls the "principle of factuality" (*principe de factualité*), which is concerned with the existential aspect of beings, their "that-it-is," or "thatness."[2]

Even if Meillassoux deals with the question of the absolute, this does not mean that he develops a positive concept of God. To the contrary, and as Christopher Watkin's *Difficult Atheism*[3] contends, Meillassoux pursues a "post-theological" thinking without God, that is, a thinking of radical immanence and cosmic indifference to which even a coming God would have to bow.[4]

While agreeing with Meillassoux about the significance of factuality and sharing his criticism of postmodern fideism (though for different reasons), this article will open up a direction diametrically opposed to the one of Meillassoux. It begins with a sympathetic outline of Meillassoux's critique of the Kantian and post-Kantian tradition. Afterwards, it subjects Meillassoux's account of the absolute to a critique that demonstrates its actual failure. It concludes with an outline whose account abandons both ontotheology[5] and postmodern apophatic

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[1] Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008).

[2] Ray Brassier, the English translator of Meillassoux's *Après la finitude,* renders "*factualité*" as "factiality" to, in the former's words, "mark its distinction clearly from the ordinary meaning of the French '*factuel'* ('factual' in English)." See Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 133, note 6. Yet this decision sometimes generates more confusion than clarity, especially where Brassier translates "*principe de factualité*" as "principle of factuality" (see ibid., 73 and 75). Following *Après la finitude's* German translator Roland Frommel's decision to translate "factualité" as "*Faktualität*," I here use the term "factuality" when referring to Meillassoux's "factualité," as well as in the context of my own considerations.

[3] Christopher Watkin, *Difficult Atheism. Post-Theological Thinking in Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy and Quentin Meillassoux* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

[4] See Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 115-116.

[5] That is, any conception that makes God an entity, even the supreme entity. As is well known, the term "ontotheology" gained strong influence through Heidegger. However, in referring to it, I do not mean to follow Heidegger's analysis of ontotheology in every detail.

notions of God. In this context, it is important to emphasize that God is both beyond being at the same time as God is present in being, making finite beings reach beyond themselves towards the absolute dimension of themselves.

Kantian and post-Kantian thinking and its critique

Both Meillassoux's approach and this article's own account are meant to get past forms of thought generally recognized as "Kantian" and "post-Kantian." To simplify, one might say that these forms of thought are united by the claim that all we can say about being is strictly limited by the realm of subjective experience. According to this idea, beings are what they are, and can be identified as such only inasmuch as there is human access to them. As a result, the chief theoretical question is of an epistemological character and concerns the precise structure of this access.

In Meillassoux's terms, such an approach is characteristic of what he calls "correlationism," whose basic principle is that "to be is to be a correlate"[6] of human's access to being. Kantian thinking is, in Meillassoux's words, a form of "weak correlationism"[7] inasmuch as that which is beyond subjective experience, the thing-in-itself, "is unknowable" at the same time as "it is *thinkable*."[8] One result of this conception is that "the necessity [the absolute] affirms is only a necessity *for us*."[9] In effect, then, the Kantian absolute cannot be said to consist of a reality that is its own cause because its reason for existence is not contained within itself, but is instead inextricably bound to human existence.

The "most rigorous, as well as most contemporary"[10] form of correlationism — what Meillassoux calls "strong correlationism" — is post-Kantian, and its most "emblematic representatives"[11] are Heidegger and Wittgenstein. Strong correlationism "prohibit[s] all relation between thought and the absolute," maintaining "not only that it is illegitimate to claim that we can *know* the in-it-self, but also that it is illegitimate to claim that we can at least *think* it."[12] All we can know and think is restricted to the realms of either finite appearing (Heidegger) or language (Wittgenstein).

In this sense, strong correlationism proves itself incapable of according absolute status to the correlation itself and is thus opposed to the abso-

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[6] Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 28.
[7] Ibid., 35.
[8] Ibid., 31.
[9] Ibid., 30.
[10] Ibid., 35.
[11] Ibid., 41.
[12] Ibid., 35.

lute idealism of Hegel, as well as those authors who, like Nietzsche and Deleuze, assign the correlation a vitalist but nevertheless absolute meaning. By extending Meillassoux's terminology, one might characterize these forms as belonging to the field of "absolute correlationism." For absolute correlationism, all that is is the correlate of something: "anything that is totally a-subjective cannot be."[13]

Unlike absolute correlationism, strong correlationism argues that the correlation between being and humans' access to that being rests on what is merely factual and, thus, that which is utterly contingent. In this sense, being could also be entirely different if different factual conditions obtain in which humans' access to being were also different. But because current factual conditions prevent access to this being, we can neither know nor think the nature of this different being. At the same time, however, we cannot entirely rule out the possibility of such a being since it is not the being itself that has been deemed impossible; instead, it is the current state of factual conditions as well as humans' limited access to being that is determinative. In Meillassoux's words: "it is unthinkable that the unthinkable be impossible;"[14] that is, "I cannot think the unthinkable, but I can think that it is not impossible for the impossible to be."[15] Since we can only give an account of our own factual being, we cannot exclude the possibility that there is, or was another being, and that, someday, it will replace our own being.

The weaknesses of postmodern fideism

There are several aspects of Meillassoux's critique of post-Kantian, in fact, postmodern thinking that one might find compelling. To mention only two noteworthy examples, Meillassoux claims that "the destruction of the metaphysical rationalization of Christian theology has resulted in a generalized becoming-religious of thought, viz., in *a fideism of any belief whatsoever*,"[16] and that one of the results of this is the contemporary resurgence of forms of religious extremism inextricably linked to the self-relativizing of modern reason. To quote Meillassoux: "religious belief [or rather, its distortion] is considered to be beyond the reach of rational refutation … because it seems … to be conceptually illegitimate to undertake such a refutation."[17] As a result, postmodern fideism not only leaves room for the return of a deformed religious dogmatism but also for the many forms of profane absolutes that today take the form of esotericism, political ideology or consumer culture. For "modern man," Meillassoux writes, "all belief systems

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[13] Ibid., 38.
[14] Ibid., 41.
[15] Ibid., 42.
[16] Ibid., 46.
[17] Ibid., 44.

are equally legitimate in matters of veracity."[18] An additional consequence is that political decisions and social life increasingly become the subject of moralization rather than rational debate, a development that is opposed to the rational ethos of modernity itself. To turn again to Meillassoux's remarks on religious extremism: "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."[19]

Although Meillassoux acknowledges the role played by the destruction of Christian classical metaphysics within postmodern relativism, however, he by no means sanction's the former's restitution. In claiming that there is no ultimate ground to ensure that things are what they are, he also argues that "we must uncover an absolute necessity that does not reinstate any form of absolutely necessary entity."[20] Here Meillassoux's work demonstrates its opposition to both irrational world-views, as well as what is commonly termed "ontotheology," that is, the notion "that *at least one* entity is absolutely necessary." [21] To each, Meillassoux opposes what he calls the "principle of unreason," which holds that "there is no reason for anything to be or to remain the way it is."[22] Against the idols of fideism and the God of ontotheology, Meillassoux's work affirms a thought in which there is no final foundation.

It is important to underline the absolute nature of the claim that there exists nothing necessary or that all that remains necessary is the contingency of everything, including the laws of nature. Meillassoux's thought may proceed through scenes dominated by the Kantian and post-Kantian traditions. Yet, in challenging a key aspect of Western philosophy, namely the question of an ultimate reality that provides consistency to an otherwise transient, ephemeral being, his critique of metaphysics shows itself to be far more fundamental than that of his postmodern predecessors.

In Heidegger's wake, postmodern thought rejected the ontotheological interpretation of the ground or *arché*, that is, the notion that there exists an entity that is both universal and primal, the most high and the ultimate.[23] Despite this critique, however, postmodern thought did not upset the ground in itself; instead, it let the ground remain bare and condemned thought to circle endlessly around this emptiness. Again, postmodern thinking of God in the wake of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida saw in this empty ground the prospect of the "wholly Other," a God "beyond

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[18] Ibid., 47.

[19] Ibid., 47.

[20] Ibid., 34.

[21] Ibid., 33.

[22] Ibid., 60.

[23] See Martin Heidegger, "The Ontotheological Constitution of Metaphysics," in Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 61.

being."[24] In doing so, it transformed the weak correlationist God of Kantian *Vernunftglaube* into an even weaker God, the God of postmodern apophasis.

To provide the proper context within which postmodern accounts of God develop, it is perhaps instructive to recall that, for Kant, nature no longer owes its structure of appearing to God, but to transcendental subjectivity. As God is transformed into what William Desmond calls an "*as if* God,"[25] this rational hypothesis that is the idea of God serves to satisfy the need of reason for a complete account of the world at the same time as it guarantees the auspicious character of the moral order. Once Kant's noumenal sphere (or, in Meillassoux's account, the thinkable but unknowable sphere of weak correlationism) is contested and the transcendental is replaced by the merely factual, the Kantian God turns into the inaccessible, postmetaphysical God, who provides finitude with well-intentioned ethical meaning without incurring any ontological liabilities. Meillassoux's principle of unreason also abolishes this "haunting specter of 'perhaps,'"[26] as John D. Caputo aptly calls it.

Yet, even if one agrees with certain aspects of Meillassoux's critique, one need not following him in maintaining that modern thought did not develop an appropriate understanding of the speculative power of reason (one need only think of German Idealism). Neither is one to consent to him that the truth of reason lies in a nothingness on which it is not-founded, so to speak. Quite to the contrary, being held prisoner by its own "*etsi deus non daretur*," modern thought is insufficient in that, so far, it has not been able to give an appropriate account of God after ontotheology. More precisely, it has not yet advanced a notion of God that both establishes God as the ultimate principle of being at the same time as it overcomes the ontotheological understanding of God as absolute substance, that is, as the seamless intertwining of being, representation and logos.

The principle of factuality in Meillassoux

From the brief account of the opposition to postmodern fideism already sketched, two basic questions can now be identified. First, there is the question of Meillassoux: How can it be demonstrated that there is no God — neither the ontotheological God nor the God beyond being — and that all grounds are necessarily empty? Second, the question of this approach: How an account of God be given if this God is neither the ontotheological nor the postmodern God? Both questions ask about the absolute. And while

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[24] Authors such as, for example, John D. Caputo, Richard Kearney, and Merold Westphal come to mind.

[25] William Desmond, *God and the Between* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 98.

[26] John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God. A Theology of* Perhaps (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 5.

the relation to the absolute is self-evident in the second question, it is no less certain in the case of the first. For there the absolute is to be conceived in terms of that which would allow us to categorically reject God without adopting a dogmatist position ourselves, that is, without creating a substitute ground.[27]

In taking up Meillassoux's terms, it will be important to bear in mind the following two points. First, because Meillassoux's notion of the absolute does not coincide with the notion of God, the absolute is characterized, instead, as "a being whose *severance* … and whose separateness from thought is such that it presents itself to us as non-relative to us, and hence as capable of existing whether we exist or not."[28] Second, Meillassoux differentiates between the absolute proper, or in his words, the "primary absolute," that is, the factuality of being, and a "derivative absolute," that is, the absolute as a specific character of being that makes it independent of the correlation.[29]

Meillassoux's argument begins with the following question: how can we think that which is beyond the correlation, beyond the possibility of any human access to being?[30] Tellingly, Meillassoux takes up the problem of life after death.[31] From a dogmatic point of view, the answer is clear: for the convinced theist, there is most certainly life after death; for the convinced atheist, there is no life after death. The various forms of correlation provide similarly instructive points of differentiation: for absolute correlationism, death cannot exist because there is only life, whether it be the life of spirit or of matter; for weak correlationism, life after death is only an idea, that is, something that is real only on account of some subjective commitment; for strong correlationism, though we cannot either know or think life after death, we cannot thereby conclude that such a thing is impossible.

Meillassoux's work identifies strong correlationism as its chief opponent. Yet, one observes a certain way in which the two positions are actually entangled with each other. Once strong correlationists admit that what is beyond the correlation is not impossible, they must then, against their own intentions, also regard it as a *real* possibility, as a pos-

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[27] Watkin appropriately calls the implementation of a substitute ground (preferably Humanity, or Reason) "parasitic atheism." See Watkin, *Difficult Atheism*, 17-18. See also Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 51: "We accept the disqualification of every argument intended to establish the absolute necessity of an entity – thus the absolute we seek cannot be dogmatic."

[28] Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 28.

[29] See ibid., 30.

[30] In a language that is markedly phenomenological, Meillassoux refers to the derivative absolute also as "the givenness of a being anterior to givenness [that is, givenness to someone]." Ibid., 14. "Anterior" has no temporal, but rather a constitutive meaning. That is, it refers to the way in which beings come into being.

[31] Ibid., 54-59.

sibility beyond the correlation. If they did not, then strong correlationism could not be distinguished from either weak or absolute correlationism. For strong correlationism, "what is not impossible" is neither an idea or a regulative principle of reason, as it is for weak correlationism, nor does it originate in the absolute life of the correlation, as is the case for absolute correlationism. It is, instead, both unknowable and unthinkable, and this very negation — in which one denies the capacity for knowing or thinking that which is beyond the human — has the effect of setting the impossible free and transforming it into something that can really be the case.

What, then, makes the reality of the real possibility, given that it is beyond both knowing and thinking? According to Meillassoux, it is simple factuality or "thatness." Because there exists the possibility of life after death (as well as of everything else beyond our existence), *as possibility* it is independent of the correlation. It is, in fact, independent of the correlation in exactly the same way as our own existence and the existence of our world are independent of our access to them. Both had once assumed the form of possibilities themselves, and it was neither thought nor knowledge that brought them into existence. Each is also characterized by the possibility that it will either someday cease to exist or simply pass from one form of existence to another. At its most basic level, being is characterized by a form of factuality anterior to the correlation, a "thatness" in which inheres the possibility that this or that may be the case. In what is likely *After Finitude's* central insight, Meillassoux characterizes the "principle of factuality" (*principe de factualité*) in the following terms: "it is not the correlation, but the facticity of the correlation that constitutes the absolute,"[32] the absolute proper, that is.

From the absolute that is facticity, or rather, factuality,[33] Meillassoux deduces the characteristics of the derivative absolute (that is, of being independent of the correlation). In strong correlationism, the facticity of the correlation is contingent. By contrast, for Meillassoux, facticity is the absolute, yet, this does not eliminate contingency. Rather, contingency now is the fundamental and irreducible characteristic of being. That is, all beings are thoroughly contingent. But of course, the constancy of contingency also has its negative side. The factual possibility that this or that might be the case cannot be separated from the factual possibility that this or that might not be the case. Or as Meillassoux writes: "we do not maintain that a determinate entity exists, but that it is absolutely necessary that every entity might not exist."[34] This form of contingency eventuates in what Meillassoux

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[32] Ibid., 52.

[33] "Factuality" indicates the absolute character of facticity, "viz., that the facticity of every thing cannot be thought as a fact." Ibid., 79.

[34] Ibid., 60.

calls the "principle of unreason,"[35] the second fundamental principle of Meillassoux's ontology — the negative of the principle of factuality. "There is no reason for anything to be or to remain the way it is," Meillassoux writes, "everything must, without reason, be able not to be and/or be able to be other than it is."[36] As a result, being is characterized by a fundamental "capacity-to-be-other-without-reason."[37]

According to Meillassoux, these principles do not simply apply to many different kinds of objects, but also, to follow St. Paul here, to the form of the world as such, its natural laws, as well as to its laws of thought. There are, however, two exceptions, two invariants. First, factuality itself. Because Meillassoux considers it absolute, "it is not just another fact in the world" "which might not be the case."[38] It is thus not contingent but necessary. Second, the principle of non-contradiction.

According to Meillassoux, the principle of non-contradiction must remain valid. Without it the proposition that everything is contingent, that is, that being is characterized by the capacity-to-be-other, would itself be invalidated because what is contradictory cannot become. Meillassoux illustrates the point in the following thought experiment:

> Let us suppose that a contradictory entity existed – what could possibly happen to it? Could it lapse into non-being? But it is contradictory, so that even if it happened not to be, it would still continue to be even in not-being, since this would be in conformity with its paradoxical 'essence' … Consequently, if this entity existed, it would be impossible for it simply to cease to exist – unperturbed, it would incorporate the fact of not existing into its being. Thus, as an instance of a *really* contradictory being, this entity would be *perfectly eternal*.[39]

Meillassoux makes the above point within the larger context of his discussion of Hegel. In Hegel, the principle of non-contradiction is suspended on the way to creating an absolutely necessary entity. The result, in Meillassoux's words, is that "the Supreme Being could only be the being that remains in itself even as it passes into its other, the entity that contains contradiction within itself as a moment of its own development."[40] Contingency, by contrast, or the capacity-to-be-other, presupposes a path to otherness that is fundamentally open. This is, indeed, the minimum requirement of becoming: If everything is already the case, there can be no becoming.

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[35] Ibid., 60.
[36] Ibid., 60.
[37] Ibid., 61.
[38] Ibid., 73.
[39] Ibid., 69.
[40] Ibid., 70.

Deficiencies:
The problem of becoming

Because the notion of becoming is so central to Meillassoux's ontology, any inconsistencies within that notion throw into question the whole of his enterprise. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that Meillassoux's work stands or falls with the notion of becoming.

Let us continue focusing, then, on the question of becoming to better understand the precise character accorded to it in Meillassoux's work. We can speak of becoming only, when there is continuous transition rather than sudden change. Continuous transition means that beings, while becoming, are both identical as well as different at various points in time. On the one hand, what is becoming must be identical, for otherwise one could not say that it is becoming. What is succeeding it, that is, "the different," would just be something else. On the other hand, what is becoming must be different from what it previously was. Otherwise, it would not make sense to speak of becoming. Without difference, everything would just remain the same. Time itself is organized by the intertwining of identity and difference. Moments follow one another in sequence, but they do so continuously. They refer to an ever present now that itself alters with every moment, and yet, it is constantly there.

Meillassoux, rejecting the notion of becoming as continuity through change, advances instead a conception of becoming as sudden change. One result of this allows for the possibility that, in an example obviously borrowed from Hume, all at once "the impact of two billiard-balls does not conform to the laws that govern our universe but results rather in both balls flying off into the air, or fusing together, or turning into two immaculate but rather grumpy mares."[41]

In a lecture from 2008, entitled "Time Without Becoming," Meillassoux is explicit about the fact that his concept of change is meant to break with the traditional notion of becoming. There Meillassoux discusses a notion of "Hyper-chaos" he identifies with his own project and which must be contrasted with our everyday conception of chaos. "By chaos," he begins, "we usually mean disorder, randomness, the eternal becoming of everything. But these properties are not properties of Hyper-Chaos," he continues, "its contingency is so radical that even becoming, disorder, or randomness can be destroyed, and replaced by order, determinism, and fixity."[42]

But how is one to understand this kind of becoming? The first point that might be mentioned is that even the sudden unbecoming of becoming Meillassoux describes is itself in need of a continuous temporal framework.

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[41] Ibid., 97.

[42] Quentin Meillassoux, *Time Without Becoming*, ed. Anna Longo (United Kingdom: Mimesis International, 2014), 25.

Lacking time, it would be impossible to say that becoming even takes place. Regardless of whether one speaks of becoming, unbecoming, or simple being, nothing can happen without the constant but fluid now of time. In its absence, everything would collapse into so many isolated moments without past and future, moments thrown back onto themselves and incapable of the kind of change the notion of becoming requires.[43]

To these questions, however, one might reply, with Christopher Watkin, that Meillassoux's approach does not intend to provide a positive account of the world as it is.[44] Instead, it is an account of being as it could be inasmuch as radical contingency holds that nothing can prevent it from being so. "The matter of philosophy," Meillassoux notes, "is not being or becoming, representation or reality, but a very special possibility, which is not a formal possible, but a real and dense possible, which l call the 'peut-être,' the 'may-be.' In French, I would say: 'l'affaire de la philosophie n'est pas l'être, mais le peut-être.'"[45] Yet even if we admit the importance of the may-be quality of being, it nevertheless appears necessary to provide an account of what it is "to be" in order to understand this "may-be." Otherwise one leaves oneself open to the charge of a kind of second-order *Seinsvergessenheit* (forgetfulness of being). How then, one might ask, can one understand this "may-be" without first understanding "to be"?

In approaching the question of what it is "to be," Meillassoux turns to the principle of non-contradiction. According to Aristotle's *Metaphysics,* this means that "It is impossible for the same thing to belong and not to belong at the same time to the same thing and in the same respect" (Met. IV.3, 1005b19-20). One immediately notices how crucial here is the question of time, and that Meillassoux's approach is incomplete. For although one learns from the principle of non-contradiction that the same thing cannot be itself and its opposite at one and the same time, this rule no more provides the basis for accounting for its being than does it make that non-contradictory thing a thing proper.

By contrast, a thing's being might be provided for by accounting for that identity which persists as it undergoes the becoming-other of becoming. But to think identity in this way is contrary to Meillassoux's purposes when he refers to the principle of non-contradiction. To do so would lead him back to problems he rejects, like those of essence or sufficient reason for instance. For him, the principle of non-contradiction is only applied in order to demonstrate that there is difference and that being is filled with possibility.

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[43] As Graham Harman notes: „In my view, since he [Meillassoux] is saying that everything is absolutely contingent, what he's really doubting is that there's any relationality at all." Graham Harman, "Speculative Realism: presentation by Graham Harman," *Collapse* III, Speculative Realism (Annex to Collapse II) (2007), 385-386.

[44] Watkin, *Difficult Atheism*, 144.

[45] Meillassoux, *Time Without Becoming*, 27.

Yet if all one can say about "to be" is that it is defined by its capacity-to-be-other, then one falls into a bottomless pit of possibility in which one will never see the light of the actual and the real. Apart from the fact that the idols of religious extremism are not very likely to be impressed by this aporetic rationalism, it can be observed that the will to conceive of the absolute as radically inconsistent ultimately makes thought itself inconsistent.

Factuality and the absoluteness of God

The question arises whether factuality cannot also be understood differently from Meillassoux's account. And if so, how is one to reconcile factuality and the absolute? How is one to account for becoming and change while maintaining a rigorous and yet flexible conception of being? In approaching these questions, the below provides only the most schematic outline.

To begin, let me first note that factuality is not here understood as identical with God. Instead, factuality or *thatness*, is conceived as the absolute aspect of finite beings that originate in God and can therefore serve as point of reference for developing an appropriate notion of God. While allying oneself with Meillassoux's anti-anthropological aims, one may nevertheless maintain some semblance of a "human factor" within ontology in order to use it as the speculative tool that, in overcoming itself (one may think here of another "dialectic of the ladder"), also leads one to God.

It will be necessary to bear in mind the following three essential aspects to thinking God: the notion of relative necessity, the notion of becoming-as-realization, and the notion of God as both transcendent (beyond the reach of finite being) and immanent (the existential reason of what beings are among other beings).

1. The relation between God and factuality is perhaps best understood by returning to the question of why there is something rather than nothing. Against the claims of ontotheology, one might argue that the question's answer needs not have recourse to an ultimate, even all-encompassing, entity. Instead, there is something rather than nothing because there is existence, that "there is" that is irreducible to any entity whatsoever. If this is true, then it follows that "there is," or existence, "is" in such a way that it is beyond both conceptual definitions, as well as any other form of representation. This does not, however, mean that existence, or what was above called "factuality," is here negative. Indeed, being beyond representation thereby testifies to the absolute character of existence.

One can agree with Meillassoux that factuality is the absolute and that finite being is contingent. However, it is important to prevent beings from losing their ontological consistency, as is the case with Meillassoux.

Therefore, one might understand them as contingent in the sense that their existence is independent of themselves since they do not ultimately bring themselves into being. Yet, insofar as they exist, they are necessary in at least a relative way on account of existence or factuality itself.

In order to better understand this point, it will be instructive to once again return to the question of time. In accord with the principle of non-contradiction, one might claim that beings are relatively necessary at a certain time: Insofar as they exist, they cannot not exist at the same time.[46] One might further claim that what has once existed cannot be undone. Though a certain being or entity may perish, this is no way changes the fact that the entity once was. In this sense, the entity achieves a definite and irrevocable "place in being." According to Meillassoux, however, one need not accept these claims because, sometime in the future, it may happen that this thing never existed. But such an argument immediately shows itself to be aporetic: the future nothingness of an entity, the entity's never-having-existed, would destroy its present capacity to become this nothingness. It will always have been nothing. We can therefore rightfully claim that, if factuality is the absolute, also finite beings partake in the absolute. Factuality, or existence, is the absolute dimension of finite beings.

2. As noted, the question of the absolute dimension of finite beings is related to the question of their ontological consistency. How to understand this consistency? Let me introduce at this point what one might call the "existential content" (*existenzieller Gehalt*). The term is supposed to designate the absolute aspect of every being insofar as it exists, more formally, as it is characterized by that-it-is. It describes what is inexhaustible, whether by human access or by any other form of relationship, even if it is the relationship that an entity maintains to itself. The existential content, therefore, is not "something," it has no objective meaning. Rather, it is at the threshold of being-something. It is what we must presuppose, retrospectively, if we want to understand that there is "something," and that, because of its factuality, it has an absolute dimension. This is precisely why it is not "nothing" either. For even if it is not something, retrospectively, we can say that it has been constitutive for what "something" is in itself and for others. That is, the existential content is not arbitrary. In a sense, it is specific, or definite, in that it is specifiable. Its reality is in the possibilities that it creates — possibilities of finite beings that they realize for themselves and with and against others,

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[46] See Béla Weissmahr, "Welterfahrung und Gotteserkenntnis. Gibt es eine tragfähige Form des kontingenz-(kosmologischen) Argumentes?", in *Um Möglichkeit oder Unmöglichkeit natürlicher Gotteserkenntnis heute*, ed. Klaus Kremer (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 43-44. I follow Weissmahr's distinction between "*bedingter Notwendigkeit*" and "*unbedingter Notwendigkeit*" (conditioned, or relative, necessity and absolute necessity). See Béla Weissmahr, *Philosophische Gotteslehre* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1983), 64-66.

but never *fully* realize. For that would be beyond their actual being, or the "realm of whatness," that is binding for them.

The existential content introduces us to the actual dynamics of finite being. At the basis of what seems to be the fate of finite becoming, that is, emergence and decay, there is another becoming. By contrast to Meillassoux's notion of becoming, however, it is not characterized by disintegration, but rather by what one may call a "synthesis of overcoming." It is movement that constantly surpasses itself, and in doing so, it lets beings be in time. This is so because the existential content is what, on the one hand, grounds beings and allows them to be "something," while on the other, it is inexhaustible to them. Yet, the existential content is what beings refer to while they are what they are. It is what they are pursuing while they are what they are. One might claim, then, that because of the existential content, every being is reaching for itself, and that means that it reaches beyond itself (that is, that what it is in time) towards the absolute dimension of itself. There could be no finite being without this ongoing movement of transcendence.

3. Both the existential content and the dynamics of absolute becoming in finite becoming give us access to the notion of God. It still holds that no one can know "what God is." Rather, we must recognize God from what God creates or to choose a more technical term, from what God makes both possible and real; from what God brings into being. First, God brings into being the ultimate reality of finite being, which is the existential content.

The existential content has a double-meaning. First, it is inherent to finite being. Yet in being inherent to finite being, in a second and stronger sense, it is inherent to God. One might summarize this in saying that the existential content is the work of God as well as it is the way in which God works in finite being. Or, the existential content is a reality made by God in which God manifests Godself in time and through what is not God.

This double-aspect of the existential content of inhering both to the finite and to the absolute allows to distinguish several aspects of God. There is a similarity of this approach to the reasoning about God by way of eminence (*via eminentiae*). In contrast to the scholastic account, however, it does not distinguish properties, but rather functions of God. From the dynamics or movement of finite being it deduces God who makes this movement possible; who is at the heart of this movement, which can in no way exhaust God.

Let me just mention the main aspects. As noted, the existential content is the absolute dimension of every finite being insofar as it is based in the absolute that makes finite being possible, and that is God. The first aspect of God results from the fact that every finite being is oriented towards its own existential content. It seeks its own absolute that is based in God. In accordance with a classical notion of God, from this perspective, God is both the origin and the aim of finite being, even if not directly, but rather mediated by the existential content.

God's teleological function for finite being implies several other aspects, three of which one might pick out. First, finite beings cannot exhaust the existential content, that is, they cannot fully realize it in time, they cannot be absolute. Nonetheless, every existential content is real. It exists through God. Therefore, finite beings cannot fully realize their own absolute dimension. Yet, this does not mean that they are fragmentary, as it might seem from an exclusively finite perspective. Rather, they are always already saved by means of the existential content, and that is ultimately they are saved by God.

Second, if God saves, God also gives to each its own. This is so because there is not only the existential content, but also its realization. One might return to the problem of life after death here that was already discussed.

No one can say what comes after death and, despite our fear of death, it doesn't matter. Ultimately, there is only absolute life or rather, absolute being. Yet absolute being is related to finite being in that it is — or while being — beyond finite being. Every finite being consists of a specific phase of being in which it realizes its own existential content. From a finite perspective, this phase is open, unforeseeable, and inexhaustible — until the final moment, when it becomes clear what all beings were meant to be. From the perspective of the existential content, however, all phases are already completed. They are gathered in eternity, in absolute time.

There seems to be a certain determinism here that might remind one of mythical eternal recurrence. But absolute time is not the ultimate dimension of being. Rather, it is the penultimate dimension. In absolute time, everything is gathered as what it has been and could be again. This condition is terrible in every way. If it became reality, it would mean the recurrence of everything ad nauseam. Pleasure, enjoyment and lust would reappear and be lost again. Loss, pain and guilt would reappear and solidify. Absolute affirmation, Nietzsche's *amor fati*, could not do anything here, where the negativity of finitude is absolutely perpetuated. To put it in biblical terms: absolute time is pure and unmitigated judgement. In absolute time, everything is completely there, and yet it is not fulfilled. "There is no one just, not one" (Rom. 3:10), that is, no one (and nothing) is intact and whole. It carries the stigma of time, of finitude. The verdict is on everything.

Third, however, since absolute time is only a reflection of absolute existence, it is always already overcome by the latter. At its origin (that is, anterior to finitude and determination), every existential content is without damage. While orienting themselves towards the existential content, finite beings are seeking this state of integrity. Yet they cannot reach it in finite time. They could not even reach it in absolute time, because also absolute time is related to what beings are, that is, to their objective form. Therefore, it is negative.

At this point, a further change of perspective is appropriate: Integrity can only approach beings from the beyond of both their origin and their

ultimate future. This beyond of both origin and future is the actual place of God or even, this is God insofar as God is related to finite being;[47] insofar as God makes being both possible as well as real; insofar as God, quite literally, brings existence into being. Being could not be without existence; and existence — factuality — would be empty without being, that is, if it was not related to specific entities. The intertwining of both is installed by God.

Again, one might say, with T. S. Eliot, that "in my beginning is my end" (*Four Quartets*, *East Coker* I: 1). Yet, the mythical circle is broken by the excessive power of restitution that approaches finite being from transcendence for as long as it exists. To use again the language of the Bible: When God creates God also makes sure that there will be redemption. That is, God takes care that finitude is not the ultimate structure of being. Rather, being has an origin that is beyond being itself, and it has an end that is beyond being itself. The circle of the beyond completes finite being. Yet, it also ensures that finite being will never be closed within itself, so that it is left to its own devices, to the disintegration and fragmentation of time. There will always be an opening leading out of the course of things and towards a wholeness that releases all things from themselves.

Neither the notion of Hyper-chaos nor the spectral God of withdrawal can free this world from the many powers of bondage that are rightly called idols. Truth and deliverance lie in the excessive, self-transcending movement of being, and the task of thinking is to find ways to follow it more closely.

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[47] One might recall that, in Judaism, one of the names of God is *HaMakom* (The Place).

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