

After Finitude

Quentin Meillassoux

Translated by Ray Brassier with an Introduction by Alain Badiou

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Having only recently begun to grapple with the complex and demanding work of Alain Badiou, the English speaking philosophical world now faces an equally formidable challenge in the work of his students. Leading the pack in this regard is *After Finitude*, a short, conceptually dense work by Quentin Meillassoux. *After Finitude* rehearses a number of key Badiouan themes, most notably, the need for a resurrection of ontology. However, while Badiou looks to ontology as a means of grounding a theory of politics, Meillassoux looks to ontology, somewhat more traditionally perhaps, as a means of accounting for the possibility of objective knowledge.

Meillassoux's point of departure consists of a blanket characterisation of contemporary philosophy. His position is that all of contemporary philosophy is under the sway of what he calls "correlationism." This philosophical outlook is recognisable for its core conviction: the world is only insofar as it is related to us, and we are only insofar as we are related to the world. While relatively uncontroversial within the world of philosophy, Meillassoux argues that this viewpoint forces the philosopher into a confrontation with the world outside of philosophy. Specifically, he argues that to the extent that we endorse correlationism, we are obliged to reject the results of empirical science. Since empirical science aims at producing results concerning the world *as it really is*, one cannot dismiss the notion of an independently subsisting world without simultaneously dismissing everything that science tells us about that world. This problem, for Meillassoux, becomes particularly acute in the case of what he calls "ancestral statements" (10), that is, statements concerning the world as it existed prior to the emergence of human consciousness. Indeed, since there can be no question of an experience of the big bang, or the emergence of organic life, it would seem to follow from the correlationist position that such events are simply fictional.

Now, Meillassoux does admit there are philosophers for whom this apparent disjuncture between correlationism and empirical science does not represent a contradiction. Such philosophers would happily admit that science touches on ancestral realities. They would simply add

that these ancestral realities exist only *for us*. Thus, the big bang is not an event that took place 13 billion years ago. Rather, it is an event which is *given to us* as having taken place 13 billion years ago. For Meillassoux, though, this maneuver is insufficient, and not simply because it suggests that empirical scientists are fundamentally mistaken concerning the nature of their enterprise. Instead, it is insufficient in that it evades the central question: did the big bang happen or not? Or, more generally: are the events studied by the empirical sciences simply events *for* consciousness or do they have an independent validity? If the former, then the philosopher need not pay any kind of lip service to empirical science; she can continue to discount its apparent ontological insight as an illusion of the natural attitude. If the latter, however, the philosopher is obliged not simply to acknowledge the results of the empirical sciences, but to reflect on science's ability to produce statements about events that are divorced in principle from the possibility of experience. Seeing in the first of these alternatives an abdication of philosophical responsibility, and in the second an urgent summons to philosophical investigation, Meillassoux opts for the second.

In taking on this task, then, Meillassoux promises an answer to the question of how we are able to get outside of ourselves. For obvious reasons, Meillassoux cannot adopt a Cartesian solution to this problem and assert that our knowledge of the external world is guaranteed by a non-deceitful God. Nor can he ignore the correlationist challenge altogether and simply insist dogmatically on the legitimacy of our intuitive metaphysics. Instead, Meillassoux has to find a "post-correlationist" answer to this problem. He has to identify a principle that is consistent with correlationism, but which nevertheless allows for the elaboration of a reality external to the correlation. Given the paradoxical nature of this imperative, it is perhaps not surprising that Meillassoux's 'speculative' response is somewhat paradoxical in its own right. According to Meillassoux, the sole principle which can provide a foundation for the empirical sciences is the principle of absolute contingency. Only by affirming, as an ontological fact, the non-necessity of every law and every entity is it possible to account for science's purchase on external realities.

How, then, does the principle allow for a philosophical rehabilitation of the empirical sciences? Unfortunately, beyond showing that absolute contingency implies neither spiraling chaos nor absolute oblivion, and that it is, therefore, at least minimally consistent with the orderly

universe that is the object of the empirical sciences, Meillassoux offers little in the way of a response to this question, setting it aside for development in future work. This is regrettable, since the distance between the highly abstract principle of absolute contingency and the far more tangible results of empirical science is considerable, and one would like to have some indication of the means by which Meillassoux proposes to traverse it. This problem is compounded when we discover that this is not the only instance in which Meillassoux mortgages his entire philosophical project on an implausible future endeavor.

Despite having suspended the constructive aspect of his project, Meillassoux is nevertheless able to draw a number of significant deconstructive consequences from the principle of absolute contingency. Taking up a number of seemingly intractable philosophical problems, he shows how these problems “deflate” once we take this principle on board. Hume’s famous problem of induction, for example, remains a problem only insofar as we presume that causal necessity is real. Once we have allowed for the possibility that there is no necessary correlation between cause and effect (meaning that the correlation between cause and effect is *absolutely contingent*) then the problem of locating an epistemological or metaphysical ground for this correlation vanishes. Similarly, the question ‘why is there something rather than nothing?,’ which Wittgenstein placed in the category of the “mystical,” becomes redundant once we have abandoned the assumption that there is some reason underlying the existence of the universe.

To the problems raised by the related question “why this universe rather than another?,” Meillassoux offers a considerably less straightforward response. Like its counterpart, this question is generally invoked to motivate a providential conception of the universe. By raising the possibility that things might have turned out otherwise, it encourages us to wonder at the secret necessity that allowed our particular universe to prevail. Accordingly, Meillassoux’s first line of attack against this cosmological query consists in drawing attention to its unsubstantiated “necessitarian” premise. In this case, however, Meillassoux goes further, attempting to show that the very idea that things might have turned out otherwise is unsustainable—and that our universe must consequently be seen not as a miracle or a divine gift, but as an indifferent fact.

The mechanics of this demonstration can be glossed fairly succinctly, and will allow us to bring into view a potentially serious prob-

lem. First, Meillassoux shows that the question “why this universe rather than another?” implies a conception of possibility as absolutely unlimited. Then, appealing to axiomatic set theory, he shows that the idea of unlimited possibility is paradoxical. The problem that Meillassoux runs into here is that in the same moment that he invalidates unlimited possibility, he deprives the principle of absolute contingency of its necessary corollary: the principle that *anything is possible*. In other words, by demonstrating that possibility cannot be unlimited, he implies that *something* is necessary, which means that contingency cannot be absolute. Seeking to resolve this problem, Meillassoux issues another promissory note. Among other objectives, he proposes in future work to show that the kind of unlimited possibility proper to his philosophical system is simultaneously unlimited and non-paradoxical. Or, to use Meillassoux’s own rather mystifying language: he proposes to show that the “possible as such” corresponds to the “Cantorian non-all.”

Given that this avenue of research is not pursued in any detail, we can do little more here than assent. If Meillassoux is indeed able to show that the possible as such corresponds to the Cantorian non-all, then perhaps his philosophical system may escape contradiction. One worries, however, that by assenting to every logical escape hatch that Meillassoux devises, one is not also assenting to the elaboration of a somewhat *ad-hoc* philosophical system—an extended exercise in evading rival theories rather than a coherent system in its own right. This observation is, of course, aesthetically motivated to a certain extent: one expects a philosophical system to unfold gracefully, rather than in a jarring series of left turns. However, given that Meillassoux, following Badiou, has taken mathematics as his model of philosophical rigour, it is perhaps not unreasonable to expect from him a corresponding degree of mathematical elegance. That Meillassoux has pitched his enterprise against the eminently intuitive “correlationist” notion that we are “always already” bound up with the world makes this imperative all the more pressing.

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