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**Transcendental Idealism and Strong Correlationism:
Meillassoux and the End of Heideggerian Finitude¹**

Jussi Backman

Today, transcendental idealism as a philosophical position is most often seen as a thing of the past, as a historical trend of German philosophy primarily associated with Kant's, Fichte's, Schelling's, and Husserl's very different versions of this approach. At the same time, however, few would disagree that this fruit of Kant's "Copernican revolution" has shaped the course of modern philosophy up to and including Heidegger, perhaps more decisively than any other approach. Its heritage obviously continues to inform contemporary thought in ways that are not always fully acknowledged.²

In recent years, a new philosophical upheaval against the persistent predominance of the Kantian transcendental legacy has spread from the French intellectual milieu to the English-speaking world, decisively influenced by a relatively short book by Quentin Meillassoux (2006b), published in French in 2006 and translated into English in 2008 as *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. In his preface to the work, Meillassoux's mentor Alain Badiou maintains that it does nothing less than introduce an entirely new avenue of thinking in the contemporary philosophical context: a new post-Kantian option to compete with the three dominant modern options enumerated by Kant, i.e., dogmatic, skeptical, and critical philosophy (Badiou 2006a: 11/vii).³ Meillassoux calls this option "speculative materialism," with the epithet 'speculative' emphasizing its absolute scope and distinguishing it from other "naïve," "dogmatic," and "historical" materialisms.

One of the great merits of Meillassoux's work is precisely its insightful rearticulation of the main philosophical positions available since Kant's "Copernican

revolution.” After Hume’s skeptical attack on the classical dogmatic metaphysics of the substance and Kant’s critical reaction, mainstream philosophical options have arguably consisted first and foremost of the Humean legacy of skeptical antimetaphysical stances (empiricism, positivism, naturalism), on the one hand, and of the various developments of the Kantian critical and transcendental heritage (German Idealism, neo-Kantianism, phenomenology and its heirs, structuralism, Wittgensteinian linguistic philosophy) on the other—not to mention creative combinations of these, such as Deleuze’s “transcendental empiricism.” According to Meillassoux, the Kantian path has basically traversed different forms of what he calls *correlationism*: a general approach that affirms, in different ways, the unsurpassable character of 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” (Meillassoux 2006b: 18/5). “Correlationism” is thus a broader and more inclusive category than “idealism,” whether the latter is understood in the dogmatic or in the transcendental sense. Unlike the idealist, the correlationist does not necessarily seek to refer being back to acts of consciousness or subjective processes of meaning-constitution but is simply committed to the view that any notion of being without an irreducible correlation with thinking is either epistemically inaccessible or simply incoherent—as is any notion of thinking without an irreducible relation to a being-correlate. Being, for Meillassoux’s correlationist, is meaningful givenness to thinking, and thinking is receptivity to meaningful being.

In what follows, I will try to show that “correlationism”—characterized by Graham Harman as a “devastating summary of post-Kantian thought” (Harman 2007, 105)—is precisely the conceptual innovation that allows Meillassoux to portray Heidegger as an ultimate or final Kantian of sorts.⁴ For Meillassoux, the Heideggerian hermeneutics of finitude and facticity is a contemporary culmination within the tradition of transcendental idealism, a radicalized position that can itself no longer be characterized in an unproblematic manner as either “transcendental” or “idealist.”⁵ I will first briefly present Meillassoux’s account of the main types of “correlationism”—in particular, of its “strong” variety—and then study the extent to which these labels can do justice to the Heideggerian approach by fleshing out Meillassoux’s rather sketchy way of situating Heidegger in the Kantian transcendental framework. Meillassoux

follows the Hegelian and Heideggerian maxim that all important philosophical developments require a new articulation of the history of philosophy; I will conclude by showing why his reading of Heidegger as a *strong* correlationist is of key importance to his own speculative systematic thesis, which he presents as a kind of dialectical *Aufhebung* of Heidegger's position. Meillassoux effectively uses Heidegger as a lever in his attempt to overcome the entire Kantian heritage.

1. *Correlationism, weak and strong*

Meillassoux distinguishes two main versions of correlationism, a "weak" and a "strong" one; to these, two subsequent modes of speculative thought, speculative (or absolute) idealism and speculative materialism, respectively correspond. In this scheme, Kant's transcendental idealism is presented as a weak form of correlationism according to which we only have access to reality insofar as it is phenomenal and experiential, that is, to the extent that it correlates with the transcendental structures of our cognitive faculties (sensibility and understanding). The notion of a noncorrelational and absolute realm of "things in themselves," of the "transcendental object" as the nonappearing cause of appearances, remains intelligible for Kant, even though it is the fundamental principle of critical philosophy that we have no experiential or cognitive access to any positive content of such a notion—hence the "weakness" of Kant's correlationism (Meillassoux 2006b, 42, 43, 48–49/30, 32, 35–36).⁶ However, Kant's position soon lent itself to a speculative absolutization by the German Idealists. While retaining the basic thesis that we have no access to a reality that is not a correlate of thought, speculative idealism added that it need not be construed as a critical thesis on the *limits* of thinking: the very notion of transcendent "things in themselves" is already an intellectual abstraction and inherently immanent to the correlation and must therefore be overcome as ultimately contradictory.⁷ Instead, the correlation is itself absolutized: we have access to the absolute through our awareness of ourselves as instances of the conscious and self-conscious, rational and conceptual activity of subjectivity as *spirit*.⁸ Interestingly, in addition to Hegel and Schelling, Meillassoux also mentions Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze as thinkers who absolutize the correlation under the various headings of will, will to power, or life (Meillassoux 2006b, 26–27, 51–52, 71/10–11, 37–

38, 51–52). Certain remarks by Meillassoux suggest that Husserl is also to be included in this category, even though this is left ambiguous (Meillassoux 2006b, 169/122).

The other, “strong” correlationist model is a post-Hegelian and post-Nietzschean development. It agrees with speculative idealism that any notion of a transcendent reality must be given up as unintelligible: “to be” signifies “to be given as a correlate of thinking,” if “thinking” is understood in the widest possible sense of any kind of receptivity to intelligibility. However, in addition to this, strong correlationism deabsolutizes even the correlation itself, maintaining, against Hegel, that we are unable to derive the correlational structures of meaning and meaning-constitution from any absolutely necessary principle.⁹ They must simply be accepted as an inescapable condition of our finite, situated facticity. Strong correlationism thus denies altogether philosophy’s capacity to make statements with a claim to absolutely necessary validity (Meillassoux 2006b, 42, 50–58/30, 36–42). While some strong correlationists will hold on to a notion of non-absolute, intersubjective universalism (Meillassoux seems to have Habermas’s and Apel’s theory of communicative rationality in mind), the “postmodern” variant (perhaps most explicitly articulated in Gianni Vattimo’s notion of “weak thought”) will deny philosophy even the capacity to transcend its own specific historical and cultural situation and to formulate universally valid statements (Meillassoux 2006b, 58–59/42–43). As the leading proponents of strong correlationist models, Meillassoux singles out Heidegger and Wittgenstein (Meillassoux 2006b, 56–67/41–48).¹⁰

Operating with a Heideggerian notion of “metaphysics” as a mode of thinking reality in terms of an absolutely necessary entity or mode of being – the fundamentally Aristotelian approach that Heidegger terms *ontotheology* – Meillassoux points out that strong correlationism is no longer really a “metaphysical” position (Meillassoux 2006b, 46–68/33–49).¹¹ Precisely for this reason, it is for Meillassoux the most contemporary and relevant approach, and also the one that he seeks to radicalize and overcome by turning what he takes to be its implicit presuppositions against it in order to explode the correlationist framework altogether. However, let us leave Meillassoux’s main argument aside for now and make use of his articulation of the different correlationist

positions, especially his rendering of “strong correlationism,” as a template for situating Heidegger within the transcendental tradition.

2. *From transcendental idealism to strong correlationism: Kant, Husserl, Heidegger*

We should note here that “transcendental philosophy” in the literal sense is not an exclusively modern concept.¹² The expression ‘transcendental’ has its roots in medieval interpretations of Aristotle’s account of being (*to on*) and unity (*to hen*) as coextensive, absolutely universal determinations that apply to every possible instance of “to be” and thus “transcend” even the most general categories and genera of beings.¹³ The Scholastics accordingly referred to these transcategorical notions as “transcendentals” (*transcendentia*; in late Scholasticism, *transcendentalia*). Metaphysics, in the sense of the most general study of beings *qua* beings, is, as Duns Scotus puts it, “a transcending science of the transcendentals [*transcendens scientia de transcendentibus*]”¹⁴— a study that aims beyond all delimited categories and kinds. In this sense, metaphysics has understood itself as a “transcendental” study ever since Aristotle; Kant himself speaks of the “transcendental philosophy of the ancients” (Kant, CPR B 113).¹⁵ The Copernican revolution is first and foremost the turn from the “dogmatic” presupposition of rationalist metaphysics that all or some of the transcendental structures of objects are structures of an epistemically accessible reality-in-itself to the approach of transcendental idealism, which sees them as structures of the correlation, of the way in which thinking accommodates and organizes what is given to it. Heidegger emphasizes that for Kant, transcendental philosophy remains a name for a critical, nondogmatic and nonspeculative form of metaphysics (Heidegger 1988, 16–17/11). In the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant (CPR A 11) points out that the study of the *a priori* conditions of possibility of the *experience* of objects is a study of the conditions of possibility of *objects*, that is, that the transcendentially structured experiential reality *is* objectivity as such. Kant’s “transcendental object,” by contrast, is the preobjective *cause* of the givenness of experience required to account for the receptive and essentially finite nature of human sensibility (Kant, CPR A 494; B 522).

Husserl’s account, in *Logical Investigations*, of ideal objectivities and of categorial intuition deviates importantly from the Kantian and neo-Kantian approaches, which

tend to limit the realm of objectivity to sensory experience. While Husserl, too, regards sensory intuition as the most basic form of intuition, he shows that the ideal and nonsensuous aspects and structures of experience constitute relatively independent domains that are also intended as objectivities in themselves (Husserl, Hua 19/2, 657–693/271–294). Husserl notes that Kant’s basic failure to distinguish between signifying and intuitive acts, that is, between intending an object and its intuitive self-givenness, prevented him from recognizing the self-givenness of categorial idealities (Husserl, Hua 19/2, 731–733/318–319). Moreover, Kant and his followers lack the proper method of phenomenological reduction and therefore fail to base the transcendental project on an adequate descriptive analysis of the constitution of relevant basic concepts and principles.¹⁶

However, in spite of these fundamental differences, Husserl notes in *Logical Investigations* that he does feel “quite close” to Kant (Husserl, Hua 19/2, 732/319). This solidarity with the Kantian undertaking grew into what is known as Husserl’s “transcendental turn” between the *Investigations* (1900–01) and the first volume of *Ideas* (1913). Phenomenology now becomes increasingly identified with the transcendental project that Kant undertook but, due to his methodological and conceptual shortcomings and traditionalisms, was unable to complete. “Transcendental philosophy” is for Husserl a name for “the original motif [. . .] which through Descartes confers meaning upon all modern philosophies [. . .] of inquiring back into the ultimate source of all the formations of knowledge, [. . .] of the knower’s reflecting upon himself and his knowing life” (Husserl, Hua 6, 100/97). Grounded purely in this “knowing life” of the ego as an “ultimate source,” truly transcendental philosophy is “ultimately grounded”; the “true being” of the world is thereby known “in my own cognitive formations” (Husserl, Hua 6, 101/98).¹⁷

For Kant, the transcendental structures of accessibility “mediate” between the inaccessible (transcendent) and the accessible (immanent); for Husserl, the “transcendentality” of subjectivity is related precisely to its capacity for constituting the world *as* relatively transcendent, that is, as a domain that always exceeds immediate and purely immanent presence to consciousness (Husserl, Hua 1, 65/26).¹⁸ The “cause” or “ultimate source” of all knowledge is thus the correlation itself; “a truly radical

grounding of philosophy” consists in a return to “knowing subjectivity as the primal locus [*Urstätte*] of all objective formations of sense and ontic validities” (Husserl, Hua 6, 101-102/98-99). Transcendental phenomenology fulfills the requirements of true transcendental idealism by giving up the empirical–anthropological and psychological–vestiges inherent in Kant’s weak version of correlationism and by absolutizing the correlation as a “primal locus” of meaning.

Every imaginable sense, every imaginable being [*Sein*], whether the latter is called immanent or transcendent, falls within the domain of transcendental subjectivity, as the subjectivity that constitutes sense and being. [. . .] Carried out with this systematic concreteness, phenomenology is *eo ipso* “*transcendental idealism*,” though in a fundamentally and essentially new sense. It is not [. . .] a Kantian idealism, which believes it can keep open, at least as a limiting concept, the possibility of a world of things in themselves. (Husserl, Hua 1, 117-118/84-86)

A notion of an *absolute* transcendental subjectivity encompassing all imaginable meaningful being is required in order to accomplish the quest for an absolutely universal science of absolute foundations. This quest, Husserl tells us in *Crisis*, has been handed down to us by the great philosophical tradition of modernity; should we renounce this task, we can no longer remain serious philosophers (Husserl, Hua 6, 15/17). Husserl must therefore be included within the ambit of absolute idealism in the Meillassouxian sense of an absolutized version of Kantian weak correlationism that no longer accepts transcendent “things in themselves”. To a certain extent, this is a concession to Heidegger’s provocative claim in “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking” (1964) that even though Husserl’s phenomenological method is worlds apart from Hegelian speculative dialectic, the “heart of the matter” (*die Sache selbst*) is for both Hegel and Husserl absolute subjectivity, that is, the absolutized correlation (Heidegger 2000b, 69-71/62-64).

The title of Heidegger’s essay, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” seems, in fact, to confirm Husserl’s admonition that giving up the modern transcendental project would mean renouncing the classical philosophical project as such. For Heidegger, however, the end of classical philosophy by no means signifies the end of thinking. From the Heideggerian point of view, the quest for an absolutely

universal science has been only one historical phase of Western thought, a phase whose inherent limitations are now becoming explicit, and Heidegger's later thought is concerned precisely with the possibility of a postclassical "other beginning" of thinking. In order to describe the basic method and motivation of such a potential form of thought, the term 'transcendental' needs at least important qualifications.

Heidegger, as we know, was from the beginning of his independent career critical of Husserl's notions of transcendental subjectivity and of the transcendental reduction.¹⁹ The main reason for this was the concern that these notions risk disregarding the inherent facticity, that is, the historical situatedness, context-specificity, and singularity of human being as *Dasein*. There is, however, a sense in which the "transcendental reduction" designates a move that is indispensable for genuine philosophical study. This is simply the turn from already constituted objectivities to the process of their constitution as meaningful, in Heideggerian terms, from an ontic to an ontological approach, from determinate beings or entities to their being (Heidegger, GA 24, 29/21). With regard to beings (*Seiendes*), being (*Sein*) is "transcendental":

As the fundamental theme of philosophy, being [*Sein*] is not a genus of beings [*Seienden*]; yet it pertains to every being. Its "universality" must be sought in a higher sphere. Being and being-structure lie beyond every being and every possible character that a being may have. *Being is the transcendens pure and simple*. The transcendence of the being of *Dasein* is a distinctive one since in it lies the possibility and necessity of the most radical *individuation*. Every disclosure of being as the *transcendens* is *transcendental* knowledge. *Phenomenological truth (disclosedness of being) is veritas transcendentalis*. (Heidegger, SZ, 38/35–36; translation modified)

Heidegger here seemingly returns to the Aristotelian-Scholastic notion of being as a superuniversal *transcendens*. However, as the quotation marks around the word 'universal' indicate, 'transcendence' and 'transcendental' are used here in a decidedly nonconventional sense. Being does not transcend beings in the way in which the maximally universal transcends particulars; it transcends them in the way in which the temporal horizon or context of a meaningful experience transcends the focal point of presence of that experience.²⁰ The main aim of the published part of *Being and Time* is to

show how the correlation between being and thinking is based on *Dasein*'s ecstatically temporal structure. In its most "authentic" (*eigentlich*) or ontologically primordially mode of relating to its world and itself, *Dasein* encounters the present as a singular "instant" (*Augenblick*) of meaningfulness in the framework of a concrete situation, that is, in terms of a context of specific future possibilities (*Zukunft*) emerging from a specific factual background of already-having-been (*Gewesenheit*).²¹ This context-specificity is the "radical individuation" mentioned by Heidegger in the cited passage.²² The contextual structure of *Dasein*, its "timeliness" (*Zeitlichkeit*), correlates with the contextual structure of being itself, its "temporality" (*Temporalität*; Heidegger, GA 24, 436/307). This temporality was to be disclosed as ultimately identical with the meaning or "sense" (*Sinn*) of being as such. Any meaningful presence is disclosed to *Dasein* as meaningful, and thereby "makes sense," only in the dynamic context of singular temporal situations:

[W]e project being [. . .] upon temporality [*Temporalität*]. [. . .] All ontological propositions have the character of *temporal* [*temporale*] truth, *veritas temporalis*. [. . .] transcendence, on its part, is rooted in timeliness [*Zeitlichkeit*] and thus in temporality [*Temporalität*]. Hence *time is the primary horizon of transcendental science, of ontology, or, in short, it is the transcendental horizon.* (Heidegger, GA 24, 459-460/323; translation modified)

These context-specific disclosures of being are not particular instances of any universal "being as such" that would be ideally instantiated in some absolute and ideal being, itself remaining beyond temporal and contextual determinations. Rather, the sense of being *is* the contextualization and singularization that generates singular meaning-situations and thereby lets being (the givenness of meaning) and thinking (receptivity to meaning) belong together—the event or "taking-place" that the later Heidegger famously called *Ereignis*.²³

In his later work, Heidegger ended up discarding terms such as 'ecstatic' and 'existence,' as well as 'transcendence' and 'transcendental,' as potentially misleading.²⁴ It is no doubt these expressions he first and foremost has in mind when he later notes that *Being and Time* was still steeped in the language of metaphysics (Heidegger 1996, 328/250). It is Heidegger's fundamental aim to show that there is no primordial point of immediate and immanent presence to consciousness that would subsequently be

“transcended” or “exceeded” toward a horizon. Rather, the focal point of a meaningful experiential situation is generated *only* as a singular and situational intersection of the nexus of multiple references that constitutes the unique meaning-context of that situation.²⁵ Being as *Ereignis* is not a “transcendental” feature of particular beings in the Aristotelian sense. Being and beings are no longer opposed in the sense of a universal and particulars; as Heidegger indicates in several of his latest texts, even the “ontological difference” between being and beings was only a provisional title for the dynamics of being itself.²⁶ There is *only* the event, the happening of being; there is, strictly speaking, no subject of being, no thing or substance *to which* being is happening. A being is an aspect of being, the focal point in the contextualization of singular experiential situations of meaningfulness, and a focal point is, by definition, something that cannot be conceived apart from a context.²⁷ The only “universal” feature of the singular happenings of meaningfulness is the structural feature that in their full contextual concreteness, they are unique and singular, even though they do form a historical tradition of inheritance, continuity, and relative transformation.²⁸

However, as both Meillassoux and Daniel Dahlstrom point out, there is at least one important sense in which Heidegger does remain an heir to transcendental idealism until the end: *Ereignis* remains a name for the correlation between being and thinking (Dahlstrom 2005, 47–51; Meillassoux 2006b, 22/8).²⁹ It designates the “belonging-together” (*Zusammengehören*) of being and the human being, their irreducible and inextricable reciprocity. Even the completely desubstantialized event of being, the dynamic process of the temporalizing and singularizing contextualization of meaning, remains an event of meaningful *givenness* and thus cannot be thought independently of a recipient, a receptive dimension. However, as an *event*, the correlation resists absolutization, since “the absolute” literally signifies a purely self-sufficient *self-identity* that is completely “absolved” from all constitutive relations and references to anything other than itself.³⁰ An event cannot be absolute, since it is never “identical” with itself. When the correlation between being and thinking is conceived as *Ereignis*, neither aspect of the correlation can be conceived of as a permanent self-identity, such as that of the permanently *identical* Platonic Ideas or of the Kantian transcendental subject, of the “I think” implicitly present *as identical* in all possible representations. Rather, being as

Ereignis is a name for the radical *nonabsoluteness*—the heterogeneity, contextuality, incommensurability, and singularity—of all givenness of and receptivity to meaningful presence.³¹ This is what Heidegger strives to articulate in his 1957 lecture “The Thesis of Identity,” which is perhaps his definitive statement of being as *Ereignis* and a key text of strong correlationism. All constituted identities are here referred back to the fundamental identity indicated by Parmenides, the identity of thinking (*noein*) and being (*einai*). When being is conceived as *Ereignis*, this identity, in turn, is no longer seen as an absolute self-identity but rather as a structural feature of the heterogeneous and singular events of the correlation.

We must experience simply this lending [*Eignen*] in which the human being and being [*Sein*] lend themselves to each other [*einander ge-eignet sind*], that is, we must enter into what we call *the event* [*Ereignis*]. [. . .] The word [sc. *Ereignis*] is now used as a *singulare tantum* [i.e., a noun used only in the singular]. What it indicates takes place only in the singular [*Einzahl*], no, not in any number, but uniquely [*einzig*]. [. . .] The event surrenders [*vereignet*] the human being and being to their essential togetherness. [. . .] The doctrine of metaphysics represents identity [*Identität*] as a fundamental feature of being. Now it becomes clear that being belongs with thinking to an identity whose essence [*Wesen*] stems from that letting-together which we call the event. The essence of identity is a property [*Eigentum*] of the event. (Heidegger 2002, 24, 25, 27/36, 38, 39; translation modified)

As the happening of the correlation in which every being, every singular instance of meaningful presence is “grounded” in the sense of being contextualized and thereby made meaningful in a radically singular way, *Ereignis* itself can no longer be “grounded,” given further “grounds” or “reasons.” *That* the correlation takes place at all, *that* there is any meaningful givenness at all, is radically factual; it resists the question “Why?” which can only be asked of particular things. “The event [*Er-eignis*] and the possibility of the *why!* Can the ‘why’ still be made into a tribunal before which being [*Seyn*] is to be placed? [...] Why beyng? From within it itself. [...] Ground-less [*grund-los*]; unfathomable [*abgründig*].” (Heidegger, GA 65, 509/400; translation modified)

3. *From strong correlationism to speculative materialism: Meillassoux's argument from mortality*

In articulating his own speculative position, Meillassoux's strategy is to present it as unfolding from an implicit presupposition of Heideggerian strong correlationism. Meillassoux maintains that this approach is ultimately incapable of renouncing absolute principles altogether; on the contrary, it implicitly presupposes one. Just as Kant's weak version fell prey to the absolutization, by absolute idealism, of its basic principle, or the inseparability of thinking and being (termed the 'primacy of the correlate' by Meillassoux), Heideggerian "strong" correlationism falls prey to the absolutization of its additional second principle (the "facticity of the correlation") according to which the happening of the correlation is itself a factual and singular event without absolute grounds.

[I]f an absolute capable of withstanding the ravages of the correlationist circle remains conceivable, it can only be the one that results from the absolutization of the strong model's second decision—*which is to say, facticity*. [. . .] Accordingly, we must try to understand why *it is not the correlation but the facticity of the correlation that constitutes the absolute*. (Meillassoux 2006b, 71–72/52)

This *absolutization of facticity* is the "non-metaphysical absolute" speculative materialism is looking for (Meillassoux 2006b, 70/51). The specific argument through which Meillassoux hopes to accomplish it is related to mortality. In Heidegger's fundamental ontology, Kant's transcendental apperception, in the sense of a constantly possible awareness of one's own consciousness, is modified and complemented by being-towards-death (*Sein zum Tode*), that is, by an awareness of the constant possibility of the total absence of one's own experiential horizon. The awareness of the fact "I think" is referred to awareness of the fact "I can die," an awareness that first individualizes *Dasein* as a specific, situated, and finite "I" (Heidegger, SZ, 260–267, 316–323/249–255, 302–309). Mortality thus functions precisely as the "guarantee" of the finitude and nonabsoluteness constitutive of all meaningful thinking.

This *constitutive* relation to one's own death as a possibility most clearly distinguishes Heidegger's strong correlationism from absolute idealism. For Husserl, death can only be an empirical event, the cessation of the factual life of an empirical

individual, never a transcendental, constitutive relationship that thinking has to the possibility of its own absence: “[T]he process of living on, and the ego that lives on, are immortal—*notabene*, the pure transcendental ego, and not the empirical world-ego that can very well die” (Husserl, Hua 11, 378/467). Heidegger’s notion of being-towards-death, however, implies that all “living on” is structured precisely by the constant possibility of its own cessation, of its own absence, and precisely thereby individuated into one’s own finite and singular futural horizon. Even though this absence is, of course, never experientially given as such and is therefore “unthinkable” in itself, its *possibility*, the possibility of *impossibility*—of the total absence of the horizon of one’s own possibilities—as the *ultimate* possibility, is eminently thinkable. Death, for *Dasein*, is a pure, ultimate, and supreme possibility in that it is experienced *exclusively* as a possibility, never as a present-at-hand actuality: it is never actualized *within* existential time but functions precisely as a *limit* of time.³² In this sense, the account of being-toward-death is an integral part of Heidegger’s argument for the ontological priority of future over the present: death is precisely a future that can never be present, the ever-open extremity of *Dasein*’s futurity as the open dimension of possibilities, a possibility that surpasses all possible actualities.

This is where Meillassoux’s speculative argument comes in. It shares the fundamental presupposition of Hegel’s critique of critical philosophy that once a limit is acknowledged *as* a limit it has already been transcended: one has already established a relationship to what lies beyond the limit (Hegel, GW 20, §60, 97/107). Experiencing one’s own death as the limit of one’s own possibilities entails that one has already incorporated what lies beyond that limit, namely, the total absence of one’s possibilities. In other words, the constant possibility of death is conceptually dependent on its actualization—which is precisely what Heidegger denies. Just as the German Idealists argued that in thinking the finitude and the limits of thinking, Kant had already in fact transgressed those limits into the absolute realm, Meillassoux claims that in thinking the finitude of the correlation, the strong correlationist has already in fact transgressed the correlational realm of phenomenal meaning into an absolute noncorrelational realm. According to this argument, the only way for the Heideggerian to consistently distinguish herself from the Husserlian—or, more generally, for the strong

correlationist to distinguish herself from the absolute idealist—on the question of mortality is by admitting that every thinking ego does indeed have a constitutive relationship to the possibility of an *actual* reality that does not include it and hence cannot be conceived as a correlate of its thinking. There is no transcendental level of egoity from which this possibility could be abstracted away.

But how are these states [sc. mortality, annihilation, becoming-wholly-other in death] conceivable as possibilities? On account of the fact that we are able to think—by dint of the absence of any reason for our being—a capacity-to-be-other capable of abolishing us, or of radically transforming us. But if so, then *this capacity-to-be-other cannot be conceived as a correlate of our thinking, precisely because it harbors the possibility of our own not-being.* [. . .] if I maintain that the possibility of my not-being only exists as a correlate of my act of thinking the possibility of my not-being, then *I can no longer conceive the possibility of my not-being,* which is precisely the thesis defended by the [absolute] idealist. [. . .] Thus, the [strong] correlationist's refutation of idealism proceeds by way of an absolutization [. . .] of the capacity-to-be-other presupposed in the thought of facticity. (Meillassoux 2006b, 77–78/57)

This, according to Meillassoux, effectively makes the strong correlationist admit that she regards the correlation between thinking and being not merely as factual, that is, as given without any absolute necessity, but indeed as *contingent*, that is, as equally *capable of not being*. But to admit this is to admit that one ultimately thinks *everything*, every meaningful disclosure of reality within the correlation *as well as* the correlation itself, as radically contingent, as continually structured by the possibility of its not being as it is. Moreover, logical coherence requires that one actually conceives this contingency itself as absolute, not merely as a matter of fact; to maintain that the contingency of all things is itself contingent would lead to an infinite regress by again invoking an absolute contingency (Meillassoux 2006b, 78–81/57–59). Nothing—so the argument goes—can be conceived as absolute except the radical contingency of all things, which, in fact, must be conceived as *absolutely necessary*. Refusing to absolutize the correlation or any other being or region of being leaves the strong correlationist no other consistent option than to absolutize the *contingency* of the correlation and of every other being and region of being and become a speculative materialist (“materialism” being understood here in the very broad sense of a rejection of correlationism that asserts the accessibility of a notion of being that is not a correlate of thinking). On the other hand, refusing to

absolutize contingency would compel the strong correlationist to absolutize the correlation and become an absolute idealist (Meillassoux 2006b, 81–82/59–60). In other words, the postmetaphysical renunciation of the “ontotheological” absolutization of some specific entity or mode of being ultimately entails the thesis that it is *absolutely impossible* that any aspect of reality, other than this impossibility itself, should turn out to be absolutely necessary. All experience of phenomenal meaningfulness entails the total absence of phenomenal meaningfulness as a logical possibility as well as a knowledge that even on this level, the principle of the *absolute necessity of contingency*—whose different aspects Meillassoux names the “principle of unreason (*irraison*)” (according to which nothing has a necessary reason for being the way it is; Meillassoux 2006b, 82–83/60–61) and the “principle of factuality (*factualité*)” (according to which “to be” necessarily means “to be a fact”; Meillassoux 2006b, 107–108/79–80)—is valid.

This, then, is the “end of finitude” indicated by the title of Meillassoux’s book. Just as Hegel (and, in a different sense, Husserl) was the end of Kantian “weak” finitude of thinking, Meillassoux presents himself as the end of Heideggerian “strong” finitude. His argument is designed to show that in the end, no attempt to exclude *all* notions of absoluteness from the realm of thinking can be fully consistent. Finitude can never be the final word: in Hegel’s words, “the finite is the restricted, the perishable, the finite is only the finite, not the imperishable; all this is immediately part and parcel of its determination and expression” (Hegel, GW 21, 117/102). Strong correlationism’s project of deabsolutization paradoxically turns out to be committed to the threefold absolute principle of contingency, unreason, and factuality, and toward the end of the book, it becomes increasingly clear that Meillassoux is constructing nothing less than a new rationalistic *system* in which all principles—such as the logical principle of noncontradiction and the principle that there must be something rather than simply nothing—are logically deducible from the one absolute principle (Meillassoux 2006b, 91–103/67–76). He indeed announces his intention of demonstrating, on the basis of his principle of factuality, that the absolute level of being necessarily conforms to certain axioms of mathematical set theory but postpones this demonstration to later works (Meillassoux 2006b, 152–153/110–111).³³

This demonstration is a key task since, for Meillassoux, the nonphenomenal and purely formal mode of thinking noncorrelational being is precisely *mathematics*. At the outset of his book, he mentions the necessity of resuscitating the early modern and precritical distinction between primary (e.g., spatial dimensions and number) and secondary (e.g., taste or color) qualities of things, for the familiar reason that the former, as opposed to the latter, are measurable and mathematizable and can thus be conceived in a purely formal way, apart from their phenomenal qualities (Meillassoux 2006b, 13–16/1–3). Meillassoux here reveals the extent of his debt to his mentor Alain Badiou, who famously equates ontology with mathematics, specifically with modern set theory (Badiou 1988, 7–39/1–30). In spite of their differences, the two thinkers share a common goal: to undo the post-Kantian hegemony of phenomenological, experience- and meaning-related categories of thinking and to rehabilitate pre-Kantian rationalism, but *without* the metaphysical notion of an absolutely necessary entity (Meillassoux 2006b, 16–18/3–5).³⁴ This speculative “end of finitude” seems for them to promise a way out of the final outcome of the heritage of transcendental idealism, or from the contemporary “postmodern” impasse in which the deabsolutization of thinking culminates in its deuniversalization. Phenomenologists and other heirs of Kant will therefore be eager to study the further development of Meillassoux’s system and to start considering possible answers to, as well as the legitimacy of, his question: Why – and how – did philosophy “err towards transcendental idealism instead of resolutely orienting itself, as it should have, towards a *speculative materialism*” (Meillassoux 2006b, 168/121)?

NOTES

¹ I thank Marko Gylén, Anniina Leiviskä, Simo Pulkkinen, Björn Thorsteinsson, and Gert-Jan van der Heiden for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

² It is perhaps telling that Jacques Derrida, for one, urges us to be “responsible guardians of the heritage of transcendental idealism” (2003, 188/134).

³ On Kant’s distinction, see CPR B xxxv–xxxvi.

⁴ On Kantian transcendentalism as the “core” of correlationism, see Ennis 2011a, 2011b.

⁵ It should be noted that such a reading is not unprecedented. Michel Foucault (1990) presents a similar account of the closure of the modern Kantian episteme in the post-Kantian “analytic of finitude” and anthropology that finally lead to the collapse of the distinction between the transcendental and the empirical, or the constitutive and the constituted, aspects of the human being, thus pointing the way toward a forthcoming Nietzschean posthumanism, or to a “death of man.” Badiou (1989, 54–55/73–74) considers Heidegger’s great accomplishment to be the overcoming of the Kantian subject-object dichotomy. Cf. Žižek (2006, 273): “Heidegger’s greatest single achievement is the full elaboration of *finitude* as a positive constituent of being-human—in this way, he accomplished the Kantian philosophical revolution, making it clear that finitude is the key to the transcendental dimension.” Chad Engelland (2008) argues that Heidegger sees Kant as a pathway toward overcoming traditional metaphysical rationalism. See also Blattner 1994, 1999, 2007.

⁶ For Kant’s argument for the intelligibility and necessity of the notion of “things in themselves,” suggesting that while the validity of this notion is theoretically unknowable, it could be justified on a practical basis, see CPR B xxvi–xxvii. On the transcendental object, tentatively identified with the “thing in itself” and the *noumenon*, see CPR A 288–289, 366, 494; B 344–345, 522–523.

⁷ See, e.g., Hegel, GW 21, 31/ 27: “In its more consistent [Fichteian] form, transcendental idealism did recognize the nothingness of the spectral *thing-in-itself*, this abstract shadow divorced from all content left over by critical philosophy, and its goal was to destroy it completely.” Cf. GW 21, 47/41.

⁸ See Hegel, GW 9, 18–25/9–17.

⁹ For Hegel’s critique of Kant’s failure to derive the categories, see GW 20, §42, 79–80/86. On the impossibility of such a derivation, see Heidegger 1998b, 55–56/39–40.

¹⁰ For readings of Wittgenstein as an heir of transcendental idealism, see, for example, Williams 1973, Tang 2011.

¹¹ For Heidegger’s account of ontotheology, see, for example, Heidegger 1998a, 311–315/207–210; 2002, 31–67/42–74.

¹² On this, see, for example, Aertsen 1998, 1360–1365; 2012.

¹³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, B.3.998b22–27; I.2.1054a9–19; K.1.1059b27–34.

¹⁴ John Duns Scotus, *Quaestiones subtilissimae in Metaphysicam Aristotelis*, prol., n. 5.

¹⁵ In Kant’s notes, we find ‘transcendental’ defined in very traditional metaphysical terms: “The determination of a thing in terms of its essence (as a thing) is transcendental” (Kant 1928, 340).

¹⁶ For Husserl’s critique of Kant, see, in particular, Hua 6, 93–123, 194–212/91–121, 191–208.

¹⁷ Translation modified.

¹⁸ Cf. Carr 2007, 41.

¹⁹ See, for example, Heidegger, GA 17, 79–81, 273–275/58–59, 210–211; GA 20, 137–139, 150–151, 157–158/100–101, 109–110, 114. On Heidegger’s ambivalent stance toward the Husserlian reductions, see Crowell 2001, 197–202.

²⁰ In *Contributions to Philosophy*, Heidegger makes a clear distinction between “ontological” (i.e., Aristotelian-Scholastic) transcendence and the “fundamental-ontological” transcendence of *Being and Time* as *Dasein*’s exposure to the “openness of beings”—that is, their contextuality (GA 65, 217/170.)

²¹ On the instant (*Augenblick*), see, in particular, Heidegger, SZ, 335–350/320–334.

²² On *Dasein*’s singularization (*Vereinzelung*) in the instant, see, in particular, GA 29/30, 251/169; cf. SZ, 338–339/323–324.

²³ This is stated very compactly in a later marginal note added by Heidegger to *Being and Time*: “*transcendens* of course not—in spite of all the metaphysical resonances—the Scholastic and Greek-Platonic *koinon* [common], rather transcendence as the ecstatic—timeliness [*Zeitlichkeit*—temporality [*Temporalität*] [. . .]. However, transcendence from the truth of being [*Seyns*]; the event [*Ereignis*]” (SZ, 440n[a] ad 38/36n; translation modified). The obsolete German orthography *Seyn*, which was still used by Hegel and Hölderlin at the beginning of the nineteenth century, is used by Heidegger in his work of the 1930s and 1940s (albeit not in an entirely consistent way) to designate the “postmetaphysical” notion of being as *Ereignis* from being as it was conceived within the metaphysical tradition. Following a now-established convention, I render this term with the equally obsolete Middle English spelling ‘beyng.’

²⁴ See Heidegger, GA 65, 322/255: “Even if ‘transcendence’ is grasped differently than before, i.e., as *excess* [*Überstieg*] rather than as a *super-sensible being*, even then the essence of *Da-sein* is all too easily distorted by this

determination. For, even in this way, transcendence presupposes a *below and a hither side* [*Unten und Diesseits*] and is still in danger of being misinterpreted as an action of an ‘I,’ a subject. Thus in the end even this concept of transcendence is mired in Platonism [. . .]” (translation modified; cf. GA 65, 217/169–170). “I have deleted the word ‘existence’ from the vocabulary of the thinking that moves in the compass of the question of *Being and Time*. The seemingly contrary name ‘insistency’ [*Inständigkeit*] is used instead” (GA 49, 54; my translation). For the later Heidegger’s genealogy of the term ‘transcendental,’ see Heidegger 1997b, 133–143/77–83.

For an elaborate discussion of the earlier and later Heidegger’s ambivalent relationship to the transcendental tradition, see Dahlstrom 2005. Michael Inwood (1999, 227) stresses that Heidegger “rejects the *word* ‘transcendence’ rather than the concept.” Cf. Malpas 2007.

²⁵ This, arguably, is what Heidegger strives to articulate in his lecture on “The Thing”: “Each thing arrests [*verweilt*] the fourfold [*Geviert*] into a happening of the simple oneness of world. [. . .] Whatever becomes a thing takes place [*ereignet sich*] out of the ringing [*Gering*] of the world’s mirror-play [*Spiegel-Spiels*]” (Heidegger 2000, 173, 174/178, 179; translation modified).

²⁶ See, for example, Heidegger, GA 65, 474/373: “Now what becomes of the *distinction between* [*Unterscheidung*] beings and beyng [*Seyn*]? Now we grasp this distinction as the merely metaphysically conceived, and thus already misinterpreted, foreground of a de-cision [*Ent-scheidung*] which *is* beyng itself [. . .]” (translation modified). In a later marginal note to “On the Essence of Ground,” Heidegger speaks of the necessity of “*overcoming* the ‘distinction’” between being and beings and of “thinking the ‘distinction’ as beyng [*Seyn*] itself” (2000, 134n[c]/105n[c]).

²⁷ Heidegger, GA 65, 472, 474/372–373: “The full abidance [*Wesung*] of beyng [*Seyns*] in the truth of the event [*Wahrheit des Ereignisses*] allows us to realize that beyng and only beyng *is* and that beings [*das Seiende*] are *not*. [. . .] beyng *is* unique, and therefore it ‘is’ never a being [. . .] if beings *are not*, then that means beings continue to belong to beyng as the *preservation* of its truth [. . .]” (translation modified).

²⁸ Heidegger, GA 65, 66/53: “[W]here beyng is conceived as event [*Ereignis*], essentiality [*Wesentlichkeit*] is determined in terms of the originality and uniqueness [*Einzigkeit*] of beyng itself. There the essence is not the general but is rather precisely the abidance [*Wesung*] of uniqueness in each instant” (translation modified). It must be decided “whether beings take being [*Sein*] as what is ‘most general’ to them [. . .] *or* whether beyng in its uniqueness comes to words and thoroughly attunes beings as singular [*Einmaliges*]” (GA 65, 90–91/72; translation modified). GA 65, 55/45: “*Only what is singular can be repeated*” (translation modified). Cf. Heidegger, GA 26, 128/108: “beyng itself is uniqueness, is singularity [*Einmaligkeit*] [. . .] this singularity does not exclude a ‘once more,’ but the contrary” (translation modified).

²⁹ The other transcendental vestiges in the later Heidegger listed by Dahlstrom are the notions of being as time-space (*Zeit-Raum*) and of being as “grounding” beings.

³⁰ Cf. Heidegger 2003, 136/102: “The absoluteness of the absolute is characterized by the unity of absolvence [*Absolvenz*] (disengagement from relation), absolving (completeness of disengagement), and absolution (acquittal on the basis of that completeness)” (translation modified).

³¹ In his 1962 seminar on the lecture “Time and Being,” Heidegger makes a comparison between Hegel’s notion of the absolute and his own notion of *Ereignis*: “Since for Hegel the human being is the place of the Absolute’s coming-to-itself, that coming-to-itself leads to the overcoming of the human being’s finitude. For Heidegger, in contrast, it is precisely finitude that comes to view—not only the human being’s finitude, but the finitude of the event [*Ereignisses*] itself” (2000b, 53/49). Cf. Agamben 1999.

³² Heidegger, SZ, 261, 262/250, 251: “[W]e must characterize being-toward-death as a *being toward a possibility*, toward an eminent possibility of *Dasein* itself. [. . .] As possibility, death gives *Dasein* nothing to ‘be actualized’ and nothing which it itself could *be* as something real. It is the possibility of the impossibility of every mode of comportment toward . . . , of every way of existing. [T]his possibility offers no support for becoming intent on something, for ‘picturing’ for oneself the actuality that is possible and so forgetting its possibility” (translation modified).

³³ Meillassoux presumably intends to continue his argument and finalize his system in his forthcoming multivolume work on “divine inexistence” (*L’inexistence divine*; see Meillassoux 2006b, 67n1/132n15). Translated excerpts from the current manuscript of the work have been published in Harman (2011). Some of the central theses of this work are discussed in Meillassoux 2006a.

³⁴ Badiou provocatively maintains that “[t]he critical machinery he [Kant] set up has enduringly poisoned philosophy [. . .]. Kant is the inventor of the disastrous theme of our ‘finitude’” (2006b, 561/535).

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