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Author(s): Backman, Jussi

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A Religious End of Metaphysics?

Heidegger, Meillassoux and the Question of Fideism

Jussi Backman

The publication of Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (*Après la finitude: Essai sur la nécessité de la contingence*, 2006, English translation 2008) started a minor upheaval within French philosophy, one that rapidly spread into the Anglophone philosophical world. Marked by a rare intellectual audacity that is barely concealed by its modest and measured tone and its sober argumentative style, the book not only attempts a clear break with some of the most established points of departure of post-Heideggerian phenomenology, hermeneutics, (post)structuralism, post-Quinean naturalism, and post-Wittgensteinian philosophy of language, but, in fact, seeks to upset the foundations of most of post-Kantian thought. In his preface to the

book, Meillassoux's mentor Alain Badiou (2006, 11; 2008, vii) maintains that *After Finitude* does nothing less than offer a new *speculative* alternative to the three main philosophical options outlined by Kant, that is, dogmatic (rationalist), skeptical (Humean), and critical (Kantian) philosophy, different versions of which still dominate the contemporary philosophical scene.¹

What Meillassoux essentially claims is that the new period of modern philosophy introduced by Kant's "Copernican revolution" is fundamentally oriented by an approach that Meillassoux terms *correlationism*. The first part of this essay will briefly introduce this notion, focusing on Meillassoux's distinction between Kant's "weak" correlationism and a contemporary "strong" version, most prominently represented by Heidegger and Wittgenstein, and on Meillassoux's intricate argument designed to reveal an inherent inconsistency in strong correlationism. However, our main focus is on one of the central *motives* cited by Meillassoux for his attack on strong correlationism: his diagnosis of the *fideism* that he sees as inherent to this ultimate outcome of the Kantian heritage. The finitization of reason launched by Kant's critical project progressively deprived philosophy of any dogmatic or speculative claims to an *absolute* reference point. Nonetheless, Meillassoux claims, this deabsolutization of thinking cannot avoid surrendering the room vacated by the metaphysical absolutes to the realm of *faith*, which now becomes increasingly immunized against the claims of critical reason—provided that faith, in turn, makes no more claims on the finite domain of rational, discursive thought. By highlighting certain problematic aspects in Meillassoux's account of contemporary fideism, the present essay questions the cogency of this specific diagnosis. This permits us to pose some more general questions regarding the kind of

¹ For Kant's distinction, see Kant 1998a, 33–34 (B XXXV–XXXVI); 1998b, 119.

modernity Meillassoux seeks to recover through his proposal of a speculative way out of the ravages of contemporary correlationism.

1. Strong correlationism and speculative materialism

Let us start by elucidating the key notions of “correlationism” and “speculative” thinking. Correlationism is defined by Meillassoux (2006a, 18; 2008a, 5) as a primarily epistemological principle according to which being and thinking—the latter understood in the widest possible sense of any activity related to the reception, articulation or constitution of meaning—cannot be conceived or accessed apart from each other, but only in terms of their reciprocal correlation, that is, in terms of the (meaningful) givenness of being to thinking and of the corresponding inherent orientation of thinking to being. *Speculative* is to be understood here in the sense of an approach professing access, by logical and conceptual means, to knowledge about the absolute reality of “things in themselves,” a claim proscribed by Kant’s critical philosophy but later vindicated by the German Idealists in a dialectical form (Meillassoux 2006a, 47–48; 2008a, 34). The defining principle of what Meillassoux (2006a, 26–27, 42, 48–49; 2008a, 10–11, 30, 35) terms Kant’s “weak” correlationism is that we have access to being only *insofar as* it is an objective phenomenal correlate of our experience, structured by the transcendental forms and categories of our sensory intuition and discursive understanding, while the absolute, correlation-transcendent *source* or *cause* of empirical experience remains epistemically inaccessible.² This was transformed by speculative

² 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 Kant 1998a, 27–28 (B XXVI–XXVII); 1998b, 115–16.

idealism into an absolute metaphysical principle that denies the very coherence of the notion of noncorrelational things in themselves and absolutizes the correlation itself in the form of an absolute subjectivity. Meillassoux's *speculative materialism*, however, is based on another kind of absolutization. What Kant's "weak" correlationism was for Hegel, the "strong" correlationism of Heidegger and Wittgenstein is for Meillassoux.

In order to understand the premises of Meillassoux's own position, we therefore need to understand how he defines the strong version of correlationism. One of the key accomplishments of Meillassoux's book is undeniably its articulation of the fundamental presuppositions of this specific position, which cuts across many established lines of division in contemporary thought. While Meillassoux (2006a, 51–52, 71; 2008a, 37–38, 51–52) regards thinkers such as Schopenhauer, Bergson and Deleuze as, in fact, committed to forms of absolute idealism that hypostasize will or life into an ultimate principle, "strong correlationism" is a category that apparently binds together orientations as diverse as Heideggerian hermeneutics, Derridean deconstruction, Habermasian discourse ethics and Wittgensteinian linguistic philosophy (Meillassoux 2006a, 42, 48–67; 2008a, 30, 35–48). Like absolute or speculative idealism, strong correlationism denies the coherence of the notion of a completely correlation-transcendent reality. However, it further denies the conceptual intelligibility of *any* kind of absolute, including absolute subjectivity. Strong correlationism holds that the correlation itself, even though it is the condition of possibility for any intelligibility or conceivability, is not given as an absolute provided with necessitating reasons or grounds. The correlation is rather accepted as an unmotivated given or "gift," that is, as radically *factual*. For the strong correlationist, however, this does not imply any actual knowledge of the nonnecessity of the correlation or of its specific structures, but rather

refers to the intrinsic *finitude* of thinking: While thinking is unable to grasp its own total absence as such, it is also incapable of giving any absolute and necessary grounds for the fact of its correlatedness with being.

Strong correlationists will disagree among themselves whether or not thinking is committed to any universal transcendental structures. While those inspired by Habermas and Apel will argue that the possibility of rational communication and argumentation depends on certain universally accepted criteria of validity and phenomenologists of the Merleau-Pontyan persuasion will point to the transcendental role of human embodied perception, Heideggerian hermeneutics will insist on the historically constituted and situated nature of all a priori conditions. However, they will all agree on the incapacity of thinking to attain any absolutely necessary point of reference, either beyond itself or within itself. In the end, thinking will have to accept an ultimate given—the simple fact of language, perception, experience or willing—that it is no longer able to rationally justify or derive from something more fundamental. Strong correlationism is a postmetaphysical approach, in the Heideggerian sense of renouncing aspirations to an absolute reference point. It is inherently committed to the historical thesis of a contemporary end of metaphysics (Meillassoux 2006a, 61–63; 2008a, 44–46).

Meillassoux's most original and striking move, elaborated in the third chapter of his book (2006a, 69–109; 2008a, 50–81), is to argue that the strong correlationist insistence on the facticity of the correlation, on the one hand, and on the inconceivability of its absence, on the other, harbors an implicit contradiction. This is illustrated by way of an intricate fictitious dialogue (2006a, 74–81; 2008a, 54–59) between several interlocutors, the most important of whom are the absolute idealist, the

strong correlationist and the speculative materialist. The topic of their dispute is mortality and the fate of the thinking ego in death. The absolute idealist must maintain that death is an empirical event affecting only the empirical, finite and personal aspects of the ego; the transcendental core of egoity, the “I think” as the subject of thought and as an absolute point of reference for all conscious acts, necessarily remains unaffected by the death of a particular individual. The strong correlationist, however, accepts no such necessity, and therefore, has to choose agnosticism regarding the ego’s mortality. Since we have no access to any necessitating grounds for the continued preservation of thinking and of the ego or the self as the focal point of thought, the strong correlationist reasons, thinking is equally conceivable as mortal, even though its death and absence *as such* remain inconceivable. This approach is particularly prominent in Heidegger (2001, 260–67, 316–23; 2010, 249–55, 302–9), for whom Dasein’s mortality—its being-toward-death in the sense of an orientation to the constant possibility of the closure of its existential possibilities (the “possibility of impossibility” as an “ultimate” possibility)—is a constitutive structure that precisely limits and situates Dasein’s existence, and thus, individuates and singularizes it.³

But here, the speculative materialist spots an inconsistency. For Hegel (1985, 31, 47; 2010, 27, 41), Kant’s delimitation of the realm of knowledge “from the inside” is incompatible with the latter’s denial of any epistemic access to what remains beyond this limit, since establishing a limit in a way presupposes that one has already grasped its both its sides, which implicitly makes Kant’s “things in themselves” an intellectual

³ However, see also the remarks in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* on death as the “end of the (my) world,” as a limit that is not an event, but rather like a horizon, as something that one cannot live through, and on the complete uncertainty of a preservation of the soul after death; Wittgenstein 1960, §§6.431, 6.4311, 6.4312.

abstraction, and thus, a correlate of thought. In an analogous manner, Meillassoux regards the Heideggerian affirmation of thinking's constitutive relationship to its own death as a *possibility* and the simultaneous denial of any access to the *actuality* of one's death as incompatible. To say that thinking can conceive itself as mortal, Meillassoux argues, can have no plausible meaning other than to say that it can conceive its own undoing and absence as such—that is, that it can conceive a reality beyond the correlation of thinking and being.

[I]f 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 idealist. For I think myself as mortal only if I think that my death has no need of my thought of death in order to be actual. (Meillassoux 2006a, 78; 2008a, 57)

In other words, egoity is conceivable as mortal only if the death of the ego, *my* death, is itself conceivable in some way—but not, to be sure, from a first-personal perspective, since what is at stake in one's own death is precisely the disappearance of the first person. Strong correlationism thus has two coherent options: It must either collapse back into absolute idealism, which denies the real possibility of “mortality” as anything more than a mood of an inherently absolute egoity, or convert to speculative materialism, which recognizes that the only consistent way to deny the absoluteness of any *instance* or *level* of reality is to absolutize the *facticity* of all things and to reinterpret this facticity in the sense of *contingency*. From accepting that all things, including givenness itself, are *given* without absolute and necessitating grounds, the speculative

materialist proceeds to attribute to them a *real* capacity for *not being* the way they currently happen to be. Such contingency is no longer seen as a phenomenological description of the givenness of things, but rather as a speculative thesis concerning the way in which all things *as well as givenness itself* are “in themselves,” independently of their correlation with thinking. Any attempt to make contingency itself contingent would be self-defeating, since it would amount to a regressive suggestion that things in themselves could be merely *contingently* contingent—invoking, once more, a more fundamental contingency—as well as the absurd view that things could just as well, contingently, be noncontingent, that is, *necessarily* the way they are. The strong correlationist who refuses to become an absolute idealist is thus ultimately committed to an absolute contingency which is “an absolute that cannot be de-absolutized without being thought as absolute once more” (Meillassoux 2006a, 79; 2008a, 58).

If this reasoning holds, it follows that the only true option to absolute idealism is asserting the *absoluteness of contingency*. This is to maintain that everything there is, including the fact *that there is* a meaningful givenness of being to thinking, is not only *factual* in the sense of not being given as necessary, but simply *contingent* in the sense of being really *nonnecessary*, that is, inherently capable of *not* being there. As we saw, such a concept of contingency, which does not merely express an epistemological limitation (“*x* cannot be known to be necessary”), but an ontological thesis (“*x* is indeed nonnecessary”), can be applied to the correlation between being and thinking only if we presuppose the conceivability of a reality without this correlation. In order to grasp itself as contingent rather than simply factual, thinking must have access to its own possible absence and to a level of being that is independent of the correlation. However, the criteria for such conceivability clearly cannot be phenomenological, as the

absence of the correlation is never “given.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, Meillassoux asserts that they must be *mathematical*: The terms under which absolute contingency can be thought must be purely formal and structural, without any phenomenal content of meaningful presence. This is why he insists (Meillassoux 2006a, 13–16; 2008a, 1–3) that the Cartesian and Lockean distinction between secondary qualities (phenomenal and nonquantifiable qualities, such as color) and primary qualities (measurable and mathematizable quantities, such as extension) must be rehabilitated. Only the latter qualities, by virtue of being conceivable in mathematical terms, can claim to be absolute and noncorrelational features of things in themselves. Following Badiou, Meillassoux suggests that mathematics has an absolute ontological scope as the formal science of being *qua* being. However, in order to be true to the rational and deductive nature of his Cartesian-style system, Meillassoux cannot simply presuppose this status of mathematics, but faces the task of deriving it from his fundamental thesis of absolute contingency. In *After Finitude*, this task is postponed to later works (Meillassoux 2006a, 37, 152–53, 176–78; 2008a, 26, 110–11, 127–28).

Even though Meillassoux’s argumentation is quite novel and compelling, many of its crucial individual steps remain underdeveloped and still require a detailed critical analysis. We should also note that it seems to rest on certain presuppositions that can arguably be contested from a Heideggerian perspective. Notably, the notion that the conceivability of death as a *possibility* logically entails the conceivability of death as an *actuality* would undoubtedly be unacceptable for Heidegger, who precisely seeks to overturn the Aristotelian hierarchy of act and potency and insists on the ontological primacy of possibility over actuality, that is, of the dimension of future over that of the

present.⁴ One's own death, for Heidegger (2001, 261–62; 2010, 250–51), is the ultimate and pure limit-possibility that *remains* a possibility. Phenomenologically, mortality is simply a futural reference without a referent that could be directly present in itself.

A critical examination of Meillassoux's premises along these lines would, however, require an extensive study of its own.⁵ Here, we rather take a look at what seems to be one of Meillassoux's central grievances against strong correlationism in addition to its alleged incoherence, namely, the *fideism* that he perceives as an unacceptable consequence of the strong correlationist deabsolutization of thinking.

2. Fideism: The “other name” of strong correlationism

At the end of the second chapter of *After Finitude*, “Metaphysics, Fideism, Speculation,” Meillassoux (2006a, 60–68; 2008a, 43–49) associates the contemporary predominance of strong correlationism with what he sees as the contemporary liberation of religious faith from the constraints of discursive rationality. An essential difference between the Kantian weak version and the Heideggerian and Wittgensteinian strong versions of correlationism is their respective understanding of the relationship between faith and reason. While Kant (1998c; 2003b), the philosopher of the Enlightenment, subjected religion to rational scrutiny “within the boundaries of mere reason”—even though he concludes that in depriving speculative philosophy of its pretension to absolute insights

⁴ This is emphasized by Heidegger in his 1925 lecture course: “[T]he relationship of being toward a possibility must be such that it lets the possibility stand as a possibility, and not such that the possibility becomes actuality [*Wirklichkeit*]” (Heidegger 1979, 439; 1985, 317; translation modified).

⁵ For a more extensive discussion of Meillassoux's account of correlationism and his “argument from mortality,” see Backman 2014b.

into the nature of God, freedom and immortality, he must “deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” regarding these topics in the practical and moral realm (Kant 1998a, 30 [B XXX]; 1998b, 117)—philosophical late modernity has made a point of regarding such subjection as in itself illegitimate. The reason for this, Meillassoux thinks, is precisely the radical finitization of conceptual thinking, the culmination of a process initiated by Kant himself.

It . . . becomes clear that this [strong correlationist] trajectory culminates in the disappearance of the pretension to *think* any absolutes, *but not in the disappearance of absolutes*. . . . Far from abolishing the value of the absolute, the process that continues to be referred to today as “the end of absolutes” grants the latter an unprecedented licence—philosophers seem to ask only one thing of these absolutes: that they be devoid of the slightest pretension to rationality. The end of metaphysics, understood as the “de-absolutization of thought,” is thereby seen to consist in the rational legitimation of any and every variety of religious (or “poetico-religious”) belief in the absolute, so long the latter invokes no authority beside itself. To put it in other words: *by forbidding reason any claim to the absolute, the end of metaphysics has taken the form of an exacerbated return of the religious*. (Meillassoux 2006a, 61–62; 2008a, 44–45)

Meillassoux recognizes, of course, that the strong correlationist project of deabsolutization was rooted in a broadly shared thesis of the end of metaphysics, understood by Heidegger as the historical closure of “ontotheology,” a term with which he designates the ontological and epistemological foundationalism dominating the

Western metaphysical tradition.⁶ According to Heidegger's grand historical narrative, Plato and Aristotle introduced the initial onto-theological models (Heidegger 1996, 235–36; 1998c, 180–81), which referred the totality of beings to a supreme, ideal and absolute—"divine" (*theion*)—instance of beingness, such as the Platonic Idea of the Good or the Aristotelian metaphysical divinity. Since Descartes, onto-theology was gradually reoriented toward a metaphysics of subjectivity that shifted the metaphysical Archimedean point into the realm of the self-consciousness of the thinking ego. In the Heideggerian account, this development attains its point of culmination and exhaustion in Hegel and Nietzsche (Heidegger 1991a, 200–10; 1996, 335–36; 1998a, 202–13; 1998c, 255–56; 2000b, 63; 2002d, 57). Nietzsche elaborates the ultimate "negative" onto-theological model in which the absolute metaphysical reference point—the will to power as the essence of life—becomes a dynamic principle of the endless, nonteleological and self-referential process of life's self-intensification (structurally characterized as the "eternal recurrence of the same") that ceaselessly generates and annihilates new meanings or "values" as its temporary instruments. The fact that the Nietzschean model entails an "inversion" of basic Platonic hierarchies—a preference for the transient, the multiple and the sensuous over the intransient, the one and the ideal—reveals the model's fundamental conceptual dependency on precisely those hierarchies, and, thus, discloses its basic nature as a final stage of onto-theological metaphysics and of its modern phase in particular.⁷

⁶ On ontotheology, see, for example, Heidegger 1991d, 207–11; 1996, 378–79; 1998b, 311–15; 1998c, 287–88; 2002a, 31–67; 2002b, 42–74.

⁷ On this reading of Nietzsche, see Heidegger 1968, 48–110; 1991a, 3–6; 1991b, 198–208, 222–30; 1991c, 3–9, 150–58, 159–83, 185–251; 1991d, 147–96; 1997b, 19–47, 62–78; 1998a, 1–4, 415–23, 425–

Meillassoux (2006a, 62–63; 2008a, 45–46) rightly adds, however, that this diagnosis of the contemporary exhaustion of onto-theology affected, in truth, only a very specific historical framing of religion. First and foremost, it involved the Christian and Islamic natural theologies, both strongly influenced by Aristotle, that assert the *rational* necessity of God as a supreme and absolute being. Far from being a contribution to intellectual secularization, the undermining of onto-theology has simply contributed to a final divorce between theology and philosophy—a tendency that had always existed within the Christian and Islamic theological traditions—and has resulted merely in the total *exemption* of divinity from the sphere of rational conceptual analysis and debate. According to Meillassoux, the fact that in the strong correlationist context, the divine can no longer plausibly claim the status of a rationally necessary supreme being whose existence can be deduced by strictly rational means, in no way prevents the divine from retaining its absolute status in the realm of *faith*. In terms of the relationship between philosophy and religion, the philosophical rejection of onto-theology is the victory of *fideism*, defined by Meillassoux as skepticism regarding the capacity of metaphysical reason to access the proper objects or sources of faith. Meillassoux (2006a, 63–64; 2008a, 46) concludes: “[I]t is our conviction that the contemporary end of metaphysics is nothing other than the victory of such fideism. . . . *The contemporary end of metaphysics is an end which, being sceptical, could only be a religious end of metaphysics.*”

Unlike the various fideisms of previous centuries, however, the fideism of strong correlationism is no longer primarily a Catholic or Protestant fideism, or even a

32, 585–94; 1998b, 1–22, 177–229, 231–300; 2000a, 72, 77–86, 109–19; 2002c, 157–99; 2003a, 89, 93–102; 2003b, 209–67.

Christian fideism in general. It is rather, in Meillassoux's view (2006a, 64; 2008a, 46), a "fideism of any belief whatsoever," a general postsecular apology of *religiosity as such*. That Wittgenstein and Heidegger are seen as the masterminds of this new "religionizing" (*enreligement*) of thinking is evident from the very choice of the term *fideism*, commonly associated with Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion (although not used by Wittgenstein himself).⁸ Meillassoux (2006a, 66; 2008a, 48) specifically alludes to Wittgenstein's references to the "mystical" fact that there is a (my) world, limited by the limits of (my) language (Wittgenstein 1960, §§5.6, 6.44, 6.45, 6.522). He also cites (Meillassoux 2006a, 66; 2008a, 48) Heidegger's rather cryptic mention, in his 1951 Zürich seminar, of a temptation to write a theology "without the word 'being'" (Heidegger 2002e, 291; 2005, 436–37), a suggestion extensively developed in Jean-Luc Marion's *God Without Being* (1982).⁹ Fideism, in the end, is thus simply "the *other name* for strong correlationism" (Meillassoux 2006a, 67; 2008a, 48).

Why this fideism is not to be regarded as a mere intellectual curiosity experimented by a handful of academics in an increasingly secularized Western world is then stated in strikingly strong terms. In its incapacity to subject religiosity to rational analysis, Meillassoux (2006a, 65; 2008a, 47) claims, the strong correlationist framework effectively renounces the Enlightenment struggle against *fanaticism* by means of reason. Armed solely with moral arguments in the realm of religion, intellectually the contemporary correlationist philosopher must "capitulate to the man of faith" in the domain proper to the latter. Hence, Meillassoux's dramatic conclusion: As the

⁸ In the context of Wittgenstein studies, the label of "fideism" was introduced by Kai Nielsen (Nielsen 1967; cf. Nielsen and Phillips 2005).

⁹ For a related reading of Heidegger and Wittgenstein as two key philosophers of facticity and finitude, see Braver 2012.

completion of the Kantian critical quest against dogmatism and ideological foundationalism, strong correlationism inadvertently falls into the arms of skeptical fanaticism.

It is thanks to the critical power of correlationism that dogmatism was effectively vanquished in philosophy, and it is because of correlationism that philosophy finds itself incapable of fundamentally distinguishing itself from fanaticism. The victorious critique of ideologies has been transformed into a renewed argument for blind faith. (Meillassoux 2006a, 68; 2008a, 49)

Meillassoux's notion of contemporary fideism clearly addresses a prominent intellectual trend manifested by Heidegger's important influence on late twentieth-century theology and philosophy of religion. This trend is visible particularly in the Levinasian "theological turn" of French phenomenology critically described by Dominique Janicaud (1991; 2000) and in the renewed interest in faith and religion in the work of post-Heideggerians such as Jacques Derrida (1996; 1998) and Gianni Vattimo (1999; cf. Rorty, Vattimo, and Zabala 2005). Moreover, we know that the critique of fideism is related to the intended role of *After Finitude* as a prelude to Meillassoux's projected *magnum opus*, known by its working title *Divine Inexistence: An Essay on the Virtual God*, to which he defers a more elaborate discussion of the contemporary role of fideism (Meillassoux 2006a, 67n1; 2008a, 132n15). Even though this work still remains unpublished in its definitive form, we know its general line of argumentation, at least in its projected form, from Meillassoux's 1997 doctoral dissertation, from the manuscript excerpts published in Graham Harman's (2011, 175–

238) introductory work on Meillassoux, and from an article published independently by Meillassoux (2006b; 2008b). This rather astounding project apparently aims to introduce an entirely novel and rational perspective on the divine, but one that diverges completely from rational theism in maintaining the present inexistence of God, and also from scientifically oriented atheism in vindicating, on the basis of the thesis of absolute contingency that entails the contingency and real capacity to be otherwise of even the most established regularities of nature,¹⁰ the rationality of a hope for the completely unmotivated emergence of an omnipotent and benevolent (but nonetheless contingent and nonnecessary) “god to come” that would redeem the promise of ultimate justice attributed by Kant to God as a postulate of practical reason (Meillassoux 2006b; 2008b; Harman 2011, 189–93).¹¹ Such an entirely groundless and inexplicable emergence of a “world of justice” is compared by Meillassoux to the equally groundless emergence of the worlds of matter, life, and sentience. In brief, Meillassoux’s project seems to consist in a rectification of modernity’s fateful excursion into correlationism and fideism with the help of a new concept of divinity that would allow us to replace traditional notions of religious faith as well as Kant’s “moral faith” with a fully rational, posttranscendental moral *hope* of a world of divine justice to come. Significantly for our present topic, this project—to the extent that it has been made public—effectively suggests that instead of

¹⁰ Meillassoux (2006a, 111–53; 2008a, 82–111) devotes considerable energy to arguing that the true solution to Hume’s problem regarding the validity of inductive generalizations and of general empirical laws is that 1. as Hume showed, there is nothing rationally necessary about the laws of nature and 2. that post-Cantorian set theory allows a mathematical model in which the (finite or infinite) amount of all possible cases does not form a closed totality, which makes even probabilistic or statistical reasoning in favor of the stability of natural laws invalid.

¹¹ Cf. Kant’s (1996, 239–46 [A 223–37; AA 124–32]; 2003a, 167–77) account of the existence of God as a postulate of practical reason. For a discussion of Meillassoux’s “virtual god” in comparison to Heidegger’s “ultimate god” and Badiou’s “contemporary atheism,” see Backman 2014a.

a fideistic sanctioning of religious faith, or of a naturalistic antireligiosity based on the sanctioning of scientific inductive reasoning, philosophy must propagate a rationally legitimized *hope* and *demand* for a morally rational and just world, a world essentially different from the one presently familiar to us.

3. Faith, the absolute, and contemporary fanaticism: Critical reflections

Challenging approaches to the divine focused on faith rather than reason is thus at the heart of Meillassoux's wider speculative enterprise. However, his diagnosis of the fideistic core of strong correlationism is among the most disputable claims of *After Finitude*. Let us look at three particularly problematic aspects of this account. Since post-Heideggerian philosophy of religion seems to be its primary frame of reference, it will be instructive to use Heidegger as a key reference point here.

3.1. Faith, belief, religion

First of all, Meillassoux's use of the term *fideism* is extremely general. The term is notoriously ambiguous and refers to several quite different historical traditions; Thomas Carroll (2008) has distinguished no less than six different connotations of the word.¹² Meillassoux (2006a, 63, 66; 2008a, 46, 48) explicitly refers to the early modern fideistic

¹² Carroll distinguishes three historical usages and three more or less pejorative usages of the term *fideism*. Historically, it refers to (1) the early modern "conformist" skeptical fideism of Erasmus of Rotterdam, Michel de Montaigne and Pierre Bayle; (2) the "evangelical" skeptical fideism of Blaise Pascal and Søren Kierkegaard; and (3) the late-nineteenth-century "symbolo-fideism" of the French Protestant theologians Eugène Ménégoz and Louis Auguste Sabatier. The pejorative senses of *fideism* are (4) Catholic traditionalism; (5) fundamentalist Biblicism; and (6) the "antimetaphysical" philosophical and theological trends of the twentieth century.

stances of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thinkers such as Michel de Montaigne, Pierre Gassendi and Pierre Bayle, who used the arguments of Pyrrhonist skepticism against the rational establishment of beliefs in order to make room for faith. Somewhat surprisingly, Meillassoux describes fideism as an invention of the Catholic Counter-Reformation; however, this Catholic fideism was, above all, a reaction to Protestant theology and one that never found particular favor within official Church theology. It was most recently condemned by Pope John Paul II (1998, no. 55; 1999, 49), who in his 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, voices his concern over an apparent “resurgence of *fideism*, which fails to recognize the importance of rational knowledge and philosophical discourse for the understanding of faith.”¹³

The term *fideism* itself was coined in the late nineteenth century by the French Protestant theologians Eugène Ménégoz and Louis Auguste Sabatier, founders of the “symbolo-fideistic” movement, which emphasized the relativity of dogmatic religious doctrines as different historical expressions of faith. The emphasis on faith and the undermining of rational access to its content has been most prominent in the Lutheran theological tradition, where it is sometimes referred to as “solifidianism” in reference to the doctrine of justification *sola fide*, “by faith alone” (Vainio 2010, 9–10). Luther himself was perhaps the first modern critic of the onto-theological “metaphysics of presence.” Thomas Sheehan (1979, 322) and John van Buren (1994a, 161, 167–68; 1994b, 157–68, 198) have shown that Luther’s distinction, in his 1515–16 *Lectures on Romans* (Luther 1938, 371; 2006, 235), between the future-oriented thinking of the

¹³ As an example of contemporary fideism, the Pope mentions (Protestant) “Biblicism” and also makes a rather indeterminate reference to the “latent fideism” apparent in “the scant consideration accorded to speculative theology, and in disdain for the classical philosophy from which the terms of both the understanding of faith and the actual formulation of dogma have been drawn.”

Apostle Paul and the present-oriented thought of “philosophers and metaphysicians,” was decisively important for the young Heidegger, as was Luther’s (1883, 350–74; 2012, 14–25) attack against the rational and natural “theology of glory” in his 1518 Heidelberg disputation. In addition to a fideistic epistemology of religion, the Lutheran emphasis on the primacy of the existential message of the Gospel also tended towards an existential, rather than cognitive, notion of faith. This tendency is most evident in the thought of Kierkegaard and visible also in Rudolf Bultmann’s “demythologization” of the New Testament; under the strong influence of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Bultmann (1960, 29; 1961, 19)¹⁴ defines faith as an act of “opening oneself freely to the future” and argues that “[a] blind acceptance of the New Testament mythology would be arbitrary, and to press for its acceptance as an article of faith would be to reduce faith to works” (1960, 17; 1961, 3–4). The same heritage is also visible in Paul Tillich’s (1999, 101) notion of faith as “a state of being grasped by an ultimate concern.”

Meillassoux’s notion of a pluralistic “fideism of any *belief* [*croynance*] whatsoever” thus becomes doubly problematic. On the one hand, we see that fideism per se is inherently linked to Christianity and to the Protestant tradition (or the Catholic reaction to it), in particular, and that the Christian notion of faith cannot be transposed as such onto Islamic or Jewish, let alone nonmonotheistic, contexts. Nonetheless, Meillassoux seems to presuppose that “faith” is a universal and defining feature of “religiosity” as such. On the other hand, while Meillassoux seems to think that “faith” invariably involves “beliefs,” post-Kierkegaardian existential-fideistic approaches, such as those of

¹⁴ Bultmann (1960, 33; 1961, 24) also notes that “Heidegger’s existential analysis of Dasein would seem to be no more than a profane, philosophical exposition of the New Testament view of human existence.” (Translation modified.)

Bultmann and Tillich, have precisely tended to distinguish sharply between *faith* as an existential attitude and *beliefs* as epistemic attitudes with propositional content.

It should be noted that while Heidegger was indisputably influenced by Lutheran fideism in the early part of his career and consistently argued that faith, properly understood, has no need of philosophy or of rational articulation, these remarks are limited to the specific context of Christian faith; they do not apply to a “religiosity as such.” In his 1927 lecture on “Phenomenology and Theology,” he argues: “[F]aith [*Glaube*] does not need philosophy. . . . Accordingly there is no such thing as a Christian philosophy; that is simply an oxymoron [*hölzernes Eisen*]” (Heidegger 1996, 61, 66; 1998c, 50, 53; translation modified). In a 1953 discussion at the Evangelical Academy at Hofgeismar, he notes: “Within thinking nothing can be achieved which would be a preparation for, or have a determining influence on, that which occurs in faith and in grace. Were I addressed by faith in such a way, I would close up my shop” (Heidegger and Noack 1954, 33; Heidegger 1976, 64; translation modified). A notion of a fideism of any religious belief whatsoever would have remained void for Heidegger, who questioned the validity of the very concept of “religion,” rooted in the Roman state cult, as a generic term for all ways of relating to the dimensions of the divine or the holy. The ancient Greeks, Heidegger (1994, 13–14) maintains, had divinities but no “religion.” Moreover, his mention of a theology without the word *being*, cited by Meillassoux as an instance of Heideggerian fideism, as well as the notions of the divine developed in his later work, are sharply distinguished from metaphysical as well as Christian theological notions and are not framed in terms of faith. The enigmatic figure of the “ultimate god” (*der letzte Gott*) outlined in Heidegger’s *Contributions to Philosophy* (*Beiträge zur Philosophie*, 1936–38) is emphatically said to be “entirely other than the ones

that have been and especially other than the Christian one” (Heidegger 1989, 403; 2012, 319; translation modified) and in his subsequent monograph *Mindfulness* (*Besinnung*, 1938–39) he explicitly detaches his figures of divinity and divinities from all senses of “religion” and “devoutness” (*Gläubigkeit*; Heidegger 1997a, 243, 249; 2006, 214–15, 220).

3.2. The absolute

The second problematic aspect in Meillassoux’s account of fideism is related to his suggestion that strong correlationism’s deabsolutization of rational thought and its abandonment of metaphysical absolutes would nonetheless allow the retention or reintroduction of an “absolute” in a nonconceptual and nonrational religious context. This claim is even more perplexing. On a very general level, one can ask to what extent, and in what sense, a strong correlationist approach to faith could concede the legitimacy of *any* notion of an “absolute.”

It is true that Kierkegaard, in *Fear and Trembling* (1843), defines faith as the pure paradox in which the singular individual stands in an “absolute relation to the absolute” (God), unmediated by any universal form. This relation assumes “absurd,” that is, intersubjectively inaccessible and ethically nonuniversalizable manifestations, such as God’s terrible command to Abraham to slay his son Isaac (Kierkegaard 1985, 84–85). This clearly comes very close to what Meillassoux seems to mean by a purely religious relationship to the absolute. Here, the “absoluteness” of God no longer consists in ontological perfection or rational necessity, but simply in the power of faith as the “absolute relation” to elevate the singular individual beyond discursive rationality and ethical concerns. However, the fact that the “absolute” is thus manifested only in faith

as a singular *relation* already in a sense dissolves the classical, literal concept of absoluteness, analyzed by Heidegger as a pure self-identity completely “absolved” from all relations to anything other than itself.¹⁵

It is important to see that the Heideggerian overcoming of the absolute entails not only a renunciation of onto-theological absolutes such as the Aristotelian God of metaphysics or absolute subjectivity, but also a formulation of a radically nonabsolute notion of divinity. In his 1934–35 Hölderlin lectures, reading the eighth stanza of Hölderlin’s hymn “The Rhine” which introduces a notion of divinities that “need” or “require” mortals since they are unable to “feel” by themselves, in other words, since they are radically *non*-self-sufficient and *non*absolute, Heidegger exalts the poetic formulation of such a notion as a true upheaval in the Western tradition of thinking the relationship between the divine and the human.¹⁶ Accordingly, the notion of gods or “divinities” (*die Göttlichen*) employed by the later Heidegger in *Contributions* and in his figure of the fourfold (*Geviert*) is utterly relational. The Heideggerian divinities are

¹⁵ Cf. Heidegger 2002c, 102; 2003b, 136: “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.)

¹⁶ In the eighth stanza of “The Rhine” (“Der Rhein”), Hölderlin (1951, 145; 2002, 223) declares: “But the gods have enough / Immortality of their own, and if there be / One thing the celestials need [*bedürfen*] / It is heroes and men / And mortals generally. For since / The serenest beings [*Seligsten*] feel nothing at all, / There must come, if to speak / Thus is permitted, another who feels / On their behalf, him / They use and need [*brauchen*].” (“Es haben aber an eigner / Unsterblichkeit die Götter genug und bedürfen / Die Himmlischen eines Dings, / So sind Heroen und Menschen / Und Sterbliche sonst. Denn weil / Die Seeligsten nichts fühlen von selbst, / Muß wohl, wenn solches zu sagen / Erlaubt ist, in der Götter Nahmen / Theilnehmend fühlen ein Anderer, / Den brauchen sie.”) Heidegger (1980, 269; 2014, 244) comments: “With the eighth stanza the poet’s thinking scales one of the most towering and solitary peaks of Western thinking, and that is to say, at the same time: of being [*Seyns*]. . . . On the peak that is now attained, Hölderlin dwells in proximity to the thinkers of the inception [*Anfang*] of our Western history, not because Hölderlin is dependent upon them, but because he is an inceptor [*Anfänger*] in an inceptual manner.” (Translation modified.)

dependent upon the relational dimension of the “between” (*Zwischen*), suspended between two poles—the historical, communal and linguistic pole of the humans or mortals, and the superhuman pole of divinities as the purposes, aims or supreme possibilities of a specific human community—and have no real subsistence apart from this relation.¹⁷ These divinities are not objects of religious faith. Indeed, we must note that “faith” (*Glaube*) and “piety” (*Frömmigkeit*) are specifically associated by the later Heidegger with the “questioning” attitude, that is, with the openness of thinking to the nonobjectifiable and nonepistemic dimension of truth (*Wahrheit*) in Heidegger’s idiosyncratic sense of the contextual and referential structure that first grants meaningful presence to beings, and thus, allows truth in the sense of the “unconcealment” (*aletheia, Unverborgenheit*) or the intelligible accessibility of meaningful things.¹⁸ In *Contributions*, Heidegger (1989, 368–70; 2012, 291–92) collapses the traditional opposition between knowing (*Wissen*) and believing or having faith (*Glauben*) by making them both expressions for exposing oneself to truth in the sense of the contextualization of meaning. Rather than implying *certainty*, both knowing and having faith here indicate a mode of *questioning* (*Fragen*), that is, of active openness to

¹⁷ In *Contributions to Philosophy*, Heidegger (1989, 470–71; 2012, 370–71) wards off the “mistaken view” that the situatedness of the event (*Ereignis*) in the intermediate space “between” the gods and the human being would imply that the event is a mere relation between pre-established relata. Rather, gods and human beings are poles or dimensions of the event itself; in their inextricable reciprocity, gods and humans are dependent on the intermediate space of meaning suspended between the two.

¹⁸ Heidegger (1977, 35; 2000a, 40) famously concludes his 1953 lecture on “The Question Concerning Technology” by characterizing questioning (*Fragen*) as the “piety” (*Frömmigkeit*) of thinking. On the Heideggerian sense of the “truth of being” (*Wahrheit des Seins*) as the contextual background-foreground structure of meaningfulness, as the “clearing harboring” (*lichtendes Bergen*) that functions as an equivalent for the ecstatic temporal contextuality thematized in *Being and Time* as the “sense” (*Sinn*) of being, see the note appended to the end of the 1930 lecture “On the Essence of Truth” (Heidegger 1996, 201–2; 1998c, 153–54).

nonobjectifiable meaning-dimensions. Those who question in this way are those who “have faith” (*die Glaubenden*) in the proper sense as the ones “who in a radical way take seriously *truth* itself [in the Heideggerian sense], not only what is true” (Heidegger 1989, 369; 2012, 292).

Rather than any extrarational sense of “absolute” that religious faith could relate to, the Heideggerian postmetaphysical notion of divinity thus designates a purely relational and nonabsolute dimension of contextual meaningfulness. Rather than a religious relationship to an nondiscursive absolute, postmetaphysical and postreligious “faith” indicates, in the later Heidegger, an openness to the inherent contextuality and singularity of all meaning. At least in the context of Heideggerian “strong correlationism,” Meillassoux’s notion of an intellectual legitimation of “religious absolutes” thus seems unwarranted.

3.3. Fanaticism

The third—and perhaps the most—problematic feature of Meillassoux’s account is his notion of a contemporary *fanaticism* against which skeptical fideism is not only defenseless, but which can even be seen as an *effect* of the culmination of Western critical reason in strong correlationism and of philosophy’s subsequent inability to combat “blind faith.” “Contemporary fanaticism” is seemingly not perceived by Meillassoux as a mere risk or possibility but as an existing reality; however, what precise phenomenon he has in mind remains rather puzzling. Who are the contemporary fanatics exactly? It is even more unclear what kind of intellectual support or shelter any presumably fundamentalist type of religious fanaticism could plausibly gain from existential and phenomenological approaches such as those of Bultmann or Marion.

Alberto Toscano (2010), for example, has disclosed the highly politicized nature of the concept of “fanaticism,” arguing that ever since Luther’s attack against the peasant revolts triggered by the Reformation, the term has been predominantly applied to socially marginalized groups opposing elites.¹⁹ Meillassoux (2006a, 65; 2008a, 47) emphasizes that his notion of fanaticism is that of the Enlightenment. In his 1756 contribution to Diderot’s great encyclopedia, Alexandre Deleyre (1756, 393; 1967, 104) describes fanaticism as “superstition put into practice,” and Voltaire (1764, 190–93; 2011, 137–38) echoes this definition in his philosophical dictionary: fanaticism is obscurantism and blind faith for the sake of faith combined with the will to violently enact one’s conviction. However, even the Enlightenment thinkers seem to be equally hard put to come up with unequivocal contemporary examples of fanaticism. They are apparently thinking first and foremost of the violent religious conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: a main point of reference for them was the 1572 St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre of French Protestants (Voltaire 1764, 191; 2011, 137).

It should also be noted that the Meillassouxian notion of fideistic fanaticism seems to be opposed to Kant’s (1996, 208–9 [A 84–86; AA 150–54]; 2003a, 114–17; cf. Toscano 2011, 86; Zuckert 2010) general definition, in *Critique of Practical Reason*, of fanaticism or “enthusiasm” (*Schwärmerei*) as precisely a *dogmatic* tendency to transcend the limits of reason, for example, by claiming some form of direct cognitive or emotional access to the supersensible divinity—a tendency that can have particularly pathological consequences in the form of *moral* fanaticism, involving claims that one’s moral acts are motivated not by rational duty but by a “holy will” without immoral inclinations and with immediate affective access to a divine or sublime source of

¹⁹ For Toscano’s critical notes on Meillassoux’s account of fanaticism, see Toscano 2011.

morality. Understood as an heir of Kant's critical philosophy, Heideggerian strong correlationism can hardly be accused of being defenseless against *this* form of dogmatic fanaticism. Meillassoux's claim concerning contemporary fanaticism thus remains conspicuously vague and indeterminate.

4. Conclusion: Meillassoux's problematic modernity

Taking these problematic aspects of Meillassoux's notion of fideism into consideration, we may thus conclude that while his argument regarding the internal contradictions of strong correlationism may remain compelling if one accepts its presuppositions, his understanding of strong correlationism as the herald of a "religious end of metaphysics" remains, in its present form, unconvincing. While it is clear that strong correlationism, at least its Heideggerian version, allows the formulation of post-onto-theological notions of divinity and faith that are not susceptible to the same type of rational critique as the speculative and natural theologies criticized by Kant, the "theological turn" in post-Heideggerian thought has mostly been limited to certain reinterpretations of the Christian tradition and has not resulted in a "fideism of any religious belief whatsoever," particularly not in the rehabilitation of a religious "absolute" in any traditional sense of this term. Moreover, it is extremely difficult to see what kind of "fanaticism" could be justified in terms of, say, Marion's account of saturated phenomena or of Vattimo's notion of "weak faith."

In its present form, Meillassoux's critique of fideism employs a very traditional Enlightenment vocabulary and rhetoric against modes of thinking that are fundamentally different from those battled by the historical Enlightenment, for which

“fanaticism” was one of the names for essentially *premodern* modes of thought. The contemporary fideism of “any religious belief whatsoever” diagnosed by Meillassoux is not a pre- or antimodern orientation, nor is it even a properly “postmodern” phenomenon. Meillassoux himself emphasizes that it is first and foremost a late modern guise assumed by the Kantian project of modernity itself.

Contrary to the familiar view according to which Occidental modernity consists in a vast enterprise of the secularization of thought, we consider the most striking feature of modernity to be the following: *the modern man is he who has been religionized [enreligé] precisely to the extent that he has been de-Christianized.* The modern man is he who, even as he stripped Christianity of the ideological (metaphysical) pretension that its cult was superior to all others, has delivered himself body and soul to the idea that all cults are equally legitimate in matters of veracity. (Meillassoux 2006a, 65–66; 2008a, 47–48; translation modified)

Meillassoux’s core aim is thus not really a recovery of a modernity “lost” by postmodernism, but rather the rational *development* of modern thought towards what he sees as its logical conclusion: The realization that the downfall of metaphysical absolutes is not consummated in a philosophy of facticity and finitude, but in the discovery of a new, postmetaphysical absolute, namely, contingency. This realization is, for Meillassoux, a key step on modernity’s way to its true calling, speculative materialism. While we have not attempted to deny the basic legitimacy or potential intellectual fruitfulness of such an innovative project, we have cast some doubts on the way it is framed through allegations concerning the complex relationship between

strong correlationism and “religiosity.” However, as we have seen, Meillassoux’s thinking remains “philosophy in the making.” We have reason to hope that his future work will complement his account of fideism in important ways and disclose, in detail, the definitive role of his approach to faith and religion in his overall project.

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