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Author(s): Backman, Jussi

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The End of the World after the End of Finitude:

On a Recently Prominent Speculative Tone in Philosophy

Jussi Backman

Against Apocalypse: Kant, Finitude, and the Ends of Philosophy

In 1796, having finished the essential part of his critical project, Kant published a short polemical intervention, “On a Recently Prominent Tone of Superiority in Philosophy.”¹ The immediate target of the polemic is a certain Johann Georg Schlosser, who had recently accused Kant’s critical philosophy of an “emasculatation” (*Entmannung*) of reason depriving us of the capacity to “intimate” (*ahnden*) an absolute and divine reality behind the “veil of Isis” of the phenomenal world.² Nonetheless, Kant’s essay is equally aimed at Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, another early critic of critical philosophy, who also insists on the possibility of an intuitive “intimation” (*Ahndung*) of divine perfection.³ On a more general and implicit level, Kant is attacking the entire nascent philosophy of German idealism

and its notion of an intellectual intuition of absolute principles.⁴ In Kant's eyes, the proto-Romantic thinkers adopt a "superior" or "lofty" (*vornehm*) philosophical tone, an "aristocratic" intellectual posture in the sense that they consider themselves in a position to dispense with conceptual and discursive philosophical labor by claiming a privileged immediate access to supersensible or absolute things. "Intimation," Kant points out, is "obscure expectation, and contains the hope of a solution"; but since this expected solution cannot be knowledge in the proper sense, it must assume the form of a "supernatural information (mystical illumination): which is then the death of all philosophy."⁵ In truth, Kant maintains, the metaphor of a goddess concealed behind a "veil of Isis" is only an aesthetic manner of visualizing not some transcendent absolute entity but the fundamental source of normativity for our practical reason: the moral law, to which we do not relate by means of a cognitive "intimation" but rather through a moral sense of duty. To ask whether this source is to be located within the human being herself or in some other being, unknowable for us, is an inquiry from which "[a]t bottom we should perhaps do better to desist . . . altogether, since it is merely speculative"; that is, it is an attempt to reach beyond the limits of possible empirical knowledge by purely conceptual means, and is as such devoid of practical relevance.⁶

For Kant, it is the inherent aspiration of speculative reason to attain an absolute reality that incites the thinkers with the "superior tone" to appeal to an immediate revelation of the absolute that would render philosophy superfluous as a rational and progressive venture. The same aspiration has led the dogmatic (that is, precritical) metaphysical tradition to strive for an insight into the ideal of speculative reason, an absolutely perfect being that would be the final cause, source, or substance of all other beings. In Kant's eyes, speculative metaphysics from Aristotle to Leibniz is dominated by the "ontotheological" fallacy that derives from the necessity of the *concept* of a supreme being the *real existence* of such a being.⁷ This fallacy ignores the true lesson of the antinomies of pure reason, namely, the disparity between the empirical world and the internal structural requirements of reason. In the end, this ignorance exposes dogmatic metaphysics to the destructive attack of Hume's skeptical empiricism. The only way out of this

philosophical impasse is the critical path of the delimitation and finitization of reason. By recognizing the status of the human being as a tragically split citizen of two realms, of the causally determined empirical world and the noumenal world of autonomous and teleological moral reason⁸ – worlds that are reconciled only in moments of aesthetic experience and in judgments of beauty and sublimity, in which we encounter sensible things as conforming to teleological ends⁹ – critical philosophy announces the irreversible end of metaphysics in its dogmatic form. In Kant's Copernican revolution, metaphysics is transformed into reason's critically limited and thus finite self-reflection on its own a priori conditions.¹⁰

In his 1982 lecture, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy," Jacques Derrida calls attention to the fact that in spite its progressive outlook, Kant's censure of the philosophical eschatology of the "mystagogues" as the "death of philosophy" is itself permeated by a certain type of eschatology, by an idea of the imminent end of a certain epoch of human reason. "But if Kant," Derrida points out,

denounces those who proclaim that philosophy has been at an end for two thousand years, he has himself, in marking a limit, indeed the end of a certain type of metaphysics, freed another wave of eschatological discourses in philosophy. . . . [F]rom then on and with multiple and profound differences, indeed mutations, being taken into account, the West has been dominated by a powerful program that was also an untransgressible contract among discourses of the end.¹¹

Kant's declaration that there can be no immediate and absolute "final" revelation in philosophy, no "apocalypse" in the literal sense of the Greek *apokalypsis*, is already in itself, in a certain sense, a revelatory, "apocalyptic" gesture. To disallow, in the name of the inherent finitude of human cognition, the possibility of an apocalyptic end of philosophy in the form of an intuitive disclosure of the absolute is already to announce the end of a certain type of philosophy, of traditional metaphysical speculation. Kant thus, as Derrida notes,

becomes himself the founding father of the discourses on the end of metaphysics, or the end of classical philosophy as such, that resonate throughout nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought.

Since Kant's day, Western philosophy has grown more and more suspicious and intolerant of "superior tones," of lofty absolutizing visions attempting to evade their own contextual situatedness or seeking to dismiss careful analytic and conceptual work. Finitude, deabsolutization, and intellectual modesty have become the philosophical order of the day. In what follows, we will take a brief look at this development in order to highlight a recent anomaly in the post-Kantian ethic of philosophical finitude—a reemerging *speculative* tone, most prominent in the work of Quentin Meillassoux, bearing many resemblances to the superior tone of Kant's early critics but resulting in a speculative type of materialism rather than idealism. This new tonality once again has the "apocalyptic" boldness to claim speculative access to absolute principles, and to thus renounce Kant's declaration of the end of speculative philosophy, but in the name of another end, the end of the philosophy of finitude. Finally, we will see that by abandoning the "correlationism" inherent in the post-Kantian philosophy of finitude, Meillassoux's speculative materialism also dismantles the close link forged by Kant between the teleological ends of human existence and a teleological notion of an "end of the world." It thus allows us to consider philosophically, in a radically novel and transformed manner, the "eschatological" possibilities of human extinction and of an ultimate moral transfiguration and redemption of the world.

The End of Finitude: From Correlationism to Speculative Materialism

As we know, Kant's immediate successors heavily disputed the status of finitude as a keyword for the ongoing upheaval in philosophy. For Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, the Kantian deabsolutization and finitization of speculative reason is a fundamentally antinomic operation. As Kant himself is fully aware, finitude is a profoundly unsatisfactory position for thinking; it is "humiliating" (*demütigend*)

for reason to accept a *nec plus ultra* and to renounce its progress towards an absolute end, since it is “driven by a propensity of its nature . . . to find peace only in the completion of its circle in a self-subsisting systematic whole.”¹² In assigning to itself an insuperable limit, speculative reason is, from the Hegelian point of view, paradoxically compelled to posit that which remains beyond the limit, the “thing-in-itself,” as its own transcendent outside or other and, thus, to determine this outside—that is to say, to appropriate it conceptually, which would precisely remove its complete transcendence to discursive thought.¹³ Hegel, who also rejects Jacobi’s notion of an immediate intuition of the absolute,¹⁴ develops instead a teleological eschatology of philosophical labor. In the course of the process of its discursive and dialectical mediation, the spirit gradually discovers an absolute level within itself, and through this discovery, philosophy is consummated and consolidated into a science of the absolute.

It is only with Heidegger that finitude returns to the center of the philosophical stage in full force and in a radicalized form. At issue in his *Being and Time* is a reconsideration of human receptivity and discursivity, no longer in the Kantian sense as structural limitations of the human cognitive capacity to know beings from a hypothetical absolute viewpoint¹⁵ but rather as fully positive conditions of the “understanding of being” (*Seinsverständnis*) that characterizes *Dasein*, the human being insofar as she constitutes the finite and dynamic “there” (*Da*) of sense and meaningfulness.¹⁶ By overcoming the Kantian gap between the in-itself and the phenomenal and the Neo-Kantian separation of ontology and epistemology, Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology is able to reappropriate critical philosophy as a preparatory groundwork for a new metaphysics—as a point of departure for a “fundamental ontology” whose “foundation” is nothing other than *Dasein*’s finitude.¹⁷ This finitude of *Dasein* is the inherently temporal structure of its existence, more precisely, the temporal dynamic that contextualizes *Dasein*’s understanding of being by situating all access to a meaningful present (*Gegenwart*) within an interplay of the intertwining dimensions of the future (*Zukunft*) and “having-been” (*Gewesenheit*), that is, of futural possibility—limited by death as the constant and ultimate possibility of impossibility—and already

established facticity.¹⁸ This temporality or timeliness (*Zeitlichkeit*) of *Dasein*'s understanding of being correlates structurally with temporality (*Temporalität*) as the meaning-horizon of being itself, and this temporally articulated correlation between finite and contextual access to meaningfulness and finite and contextual givenness of meaningfulness is the core, the fundament, of fundamental ontology.¹⁹ As the later Heidegger emphatically points out, no metaphysics in the classical sense can be built upon such a radically de-absolutized and de-substantivized "foundation."²⁰ The temporal correlation between *Dasein* and being cannot be an *absolute* point of reference, in the literal sense of being "absolved" from all essential references and relations to anything other than itself.²¹ On the contrary, it is to be conceived as a dynamic event (*Ereignis*) of contextualization in which accessible, meaningful presence, the temporal present, is ceaselessly reconfigured in terms of temporal background dimensions.

To the extent that classical metaphysics ultimately requires an absolute point of reference, an "ontotheological" supreme or ultimate instance of being, fundamental ontology's model of the irreducible temporal contextuality of being is oriented toward a postmetaphysical mode of thinking, toward another, radically deabsolutized beginning or "inception" (*Anfang*) of Western thought.²² While the Hegelian speculative dialectic—for Heidegger, the culmination of the modern metaphysics of subjectivity and of Western ontotheological metaphysics as a whole—sees itself as "the Absolute's coming-to-itself," which "leads to the sublation [*Aufhebung*] of the finitude of the human being," in the Heideggerian postmetaphysical perspective, as he points out in 1962, "it is precisely finitude that comes into view—not only the finitude of the human being, but the finitude of the event [*Ereignis*] itself."²³ Heidegger distinguishes his own understanding of finitude from that of Kant in that the former "is no longer thought in terms of the relation to infinity, but rather as finitude in itself: finitude, end, limit, the proper [*das Eigene*]*—being harbored into the proper [ins Eigene Geborgensein]."*²⁴ Finitude is no longer a deficient mode of infinity but precisely that which is "proper" for the human being; in finitude, human thinking is at home, sheltered and "harbored."

Heideggerian finitude—the finitude of the human being as a situated and mortal recipient and interpreter of sense and meaning, the finitude of being as the historical and contextual advent of meaningfulness, and the finitude of the event of their correlation or belonging-together—haunts the phenomenological, hermeneutical, poststructuralist, and deconstructive manifestations of late modern thought, that is, the contemporary heirs of Kant’s critical philosophy. Alain Badiou, an ardent critic of this legacy, is entirely justified in accusing Kant of being “the inventor of the disastrous theme of our ‘finitude.’”²⁵ As analyzed by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*, in spite of its focus on the human being as the constituting transcendental subject of knowledge, philosophy from Kant to Heidegger is compelled to address also the situated and finite reality of the human being as a material, incarnate object of empirical knowledge, and thus becomes an “analytic of finitude.”²⁶ Foucault here predicts an imminent “end” of the human being as the focal point of post-Kantian thought: The inherent contradictions and tensions of this “empirico-transcendental doublet” are becoming unsurmountable, and the anthropological paradigm of the modern Kantian episteme is being overcome toward a new kind of Nietzschean analysis of the historical forces that “produce” the human being as the discursive subject of thinking and as the subject to power.²⁷

In any case, it is clear that attempts to seriously confront the Heideggerian hermeneutics of finitude must begin by challenging Kant’s transcendental idealism. During the last ten years, such an altercation has taken place in the form of a rather heterogeneous and primarily Anglo-American philosophical movement known by the collective name of speculative realism. This new anti-Kantianism draws its principal inspiration from a single work published in French in 2006 by Quentin Meillassoux and suggestively titled *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. In his preface to the book, Badiou, Meillassoux’s most important mentor, credits *After Finitude* with a momentous accomplishment: the introduction of an entirely new avenue of contemporary thought, an intellectual option transgressing the canonical Kantian threefold of dogmatic, skeptical, and critical philosophy.²⁸ Meillassoux’s path is a speculative one in that it claims access

to the “thing-in-itself” by purely logical and argumentative means; however, as in German idealism, this speculation is of a postcritical, nondogmatic type. In contrast to speculative idealism as well as “naive,” historical, and physicalist materialisms, Meillassoux’s position is that of *speculative materialism*.

Speculative materialism is to be understood first and foremost as a confrontation with the approach that Meillassoux terms *correlationism*: the affirmation, in one sense or another, of 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.”²⁹ Correlationism is a more inclusive term than idealism. Without necessarily reducing being to the activity of subjectivity, the correlationist simply maintains that any naively realistic notion of being apart from a constitutive correlation with thinking is either cognitively inaccessible or simply incoherent, and insists that the same applies to any Cartesian notion of a thinking that is not in an intrinsic intentional correlation with being. For Meillassoux’s correlationist, being, insofar as we have access to it, is *given* being; thinking, in turn, is essentially *receptivity* to this givenness. Kant’s critical idealism is a “weak” version of correlationism according to which we only have access to being to the extent that it accords with the transcendental structures of our faculties of sensibility and understanding. Nonetheless, the notion of an absolute and noncorrelated domain of “things in themselves” remains, for Kant, coherent and intelligible, even necessary, even though it is fated to remain without any intuitive content.³⁰ As we have seen, this weak position exposes itself to the move by which speculative idealism abandons the thing-in-itself and absolutizes the correlation between thinking and being as such.³¹

“Strong” correlationism is, for Meillassoux, a development eminently represented by Heidegger and Wittgenstein. Like speculative idealism, it renounces the Kantian thing-in-itself: For the strong correlationist, being can have no other plausible meaning than being-correlated. However, at the same time, strong correlationism denies the *absoluteness* of the correlation, regarding it as radically factual and situated in the sense that the correlation and its structures

cannot be derived from any absolutely necessary principle, but must rather be accepted as elementary facts.³² This deabsolutization of the correlation leaves philosophy without any kind of absolute validity; such validity is, moreover, seen by strong correlationism as an obsolete ontotheological ideal. Heidegger asks in his *Contributions to Philosophy*: “Can the ‘why’ still be made into a tribunal before which beyng [*Seyn*; that is, being considered from a postmetaphysical perspective] is to be placed? . . . Why beyng? From within it itself. . . . Ground-less [*grund-los*]; unfathomable [*abgründig*].”³³

As in the case of the speculative idealists’ overcoming of Kant, speculative materialism seeks to perform a dialectical sublation of the strong, Heideggerian and Wittgensteinian version of correlationism. This presupposes an inherent contradiction in the position to be sublated, and such a contradiction is discovered by Meillassoux at the heart of strong correlationism’s thesis of the facticity of the correlation, within the Heideggerian account of mortality (even though he does not cite it directly), in particular. In *Being and Time*, the finitude of existential time is determined by the constant possibility of death as the possibility of *impossibility*—as the ultimate and unsurmountable possibility delimiting all other futural possibilities. *Dasein* constantly faces the possible absence of its entire horizon of possibilities, in other words, the possible absence of all existential meaningfulness. This possibility is the “ultimate” possibility precisely to the extent that it cannot be realized *within* lived existential time; the phenomenological reality of this possibility is to be a mere limit of phenomenality as such.³⁴ It is precisely here that Meillassoux spots a contradiction comparable to that with which Hegel faulted Kant, maintaining that it is impossible to conceive a limit only from within, one-sidedly, without any relation or reference to that which lies beyond the limit.³⁵ Meillassoux argues that grasping death as a *possibility*, as an extreme limit of one’s own temporal horizon, inevitably presupposes that one also grasps death as a *reality*, that is, as the *actual* total absence of the correlation. When the strong correlationist conceives the correlation as finite, as constitutively determined by its own *possible* absence, she has, in effect, already transgressed the correlational domain of phenomenal meaningfulness toward a noncorrelational

and absolute reality of the “in-itself.” In other words, the only coherent manner in which the strong correlationist can distinguish herself from the speculative idealist, who refuses to assign any constitutive role to mortality, is by acknowledging death (the absence of the correlation) as a *real* possibility, a possibility that cannot be reduced to the role of a mere structural limit of the correlation.³⁶

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 non-being. . . .* 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.³⁷

According to this argument, mortality, understood as the constitutive relation of finite and factual thinking to its temporal finitude, logically entails that thinking can relate to a reality *without* thinking, without the correlation. Thinking can, in one way or another, access a reality from which thinking is absent, even though this access obviously cannot be of a phenomenal or experiential nature. For Meillassoux, who here follows Badiou’s thesis that ontology and mathematics are one and the same, our mode of access to the “in-itself” will consist in a purely mathematical reflection on the formal structures of multiplicities.³⁸

The point of Meillassoux’s argument is to compel the strong correlationist to admit that in the end, she conceives the correlation not only as factual, in the phenomenological sense of “given without absolute necessity,” but rather as a *contingent* fact that may equally well cease to be. But since the strong correlationist admits no absolutely valid necessity, this conversion of facticity into contingency entails the acknowledgment that *every* being is radically contingent, that is, equally

conceivable as *not* being. However, Meillassoux emphasizes that it is logically impossible to conceive this total contingency *itself* as a contingent fact, as this would impose the absurd conclusion that there could just as well (contingently) be a necessary being. The principle of contingency must itself be absolutely necessary: We must say that it is absolutely impossible for any being to be necessary.³⁹ Meillassoux shows that this absolute principle further entails a principle of “unreason” (*irraison*), which is a negation of the Leibnizian principle of sufficient reason and states that *nothing* has a necessitating reason for being as it is, as well as a principle of “factuality” (*factualité*), according to which to be is to be a contingent fact.⁴⁰

The conversion of the principle of facticity into the principle of contingency is, for Meillassoux, the “end of finitude” in philosophy, the end of the predominance of the post-Kantian focus on the human being as the empirico-transcendental doublet, that is, as a finite being of the world who is also the constitutive subject of meaningful experience. Just as Hegel was the end of Kantian “weak” finitude, Meillassoux sees himself as the end of Heideggerian “strong” finitude. The deabsolutizing program of correlationism cannot be completed: In the end, renouncing the absoluteness of the correlation results in the absolutization of the *contingency* of the correlation, and of all other beings. After the collapse of speculative idealism, the only remaining option that is truly coherent is speculative materialism. Like strong correlationism, this latter position is “postmetaphysical” to the extent that it is not ontotheological: In speculative materialism, the absolute is no longer a determinate being or substance but rather a structural feature of all beings (their contingency). We thus see that speculative materialism is not a simple return to precritical, dogmatic metaphysics. It adopts the post-Kantian thesis on the end of classical metaphysics, but insists that postmetaphysics needs its own kind of absolute—philosophical thought simply cannot survive without any kind of absolute.

In the Kantian context, human finitude refers to the essential receptivity and incompleteness of human cognition, the inherent limitations these place on the scope of speculative reason, as well as the resulting increased dependency of the human being on her practical reason as a moral agent. The teleological “end” of the cognitively finite human—the finality in which the most proper human autonomy is realized—is thus, for Kant, not an insight into the absolute that would breach the “veil of Isis” covering it, but rather the “good will,” a purely rational practical orientation towards an ideal of a “kingdom of ends,” a moral perfection of the world, motivated solely by respect for the moral law and the duties it entails.⁴¹

It is important to see that this understanding of the regulative moral end of the human being is coupled with a regulative moral notion of the end of the *world* as a whole. In “The End of All Things” (1794), Kant briefly reconstructs what he believes to be the rational core of the religious idea of an end of the world and a last judgment. As analyzed by Kant, religious eschatology has its ultimate roots in the teleological idea of reason according to which “the duration of the world has worth only insofar as the rational beings in it conform to the final end of their existence; if, however, this is not supposed to be achieved, then creation itself appears purposeless to them, like a play having no resolution.”⁴² If the end of the world is understood in this way, as a narrative resolution of our striving for moral improvement in the form of an ideal distribution of perfect justice, it becomes quite comprehensible, even natural, for our practical reason. By contrast, on the theoretical and cognitive level, we are completely incapable of representing an end of the world in the sense of an end of time, since time is the fundamental form of our sensible intuition without which empirical experience becomes unintelligible. The end of temporal succession, which is equivalent to the end of all alteration and change, “outrages the imagination” of “a being which can become conscious of its existence and the magnitude of this existence (as duration) only in time.”⁴³ Those who ponder over the significance of the end of the world therefore seek to grasp

that which is wholly transcendent to knowledge and understanding and thus lose themselves in a “*mysticism* . . . where reason does not understand either itself or what it wants.”⁴⁴ An “apocalypse” in the literal sense of a direct cognitive “revelation” of the “end of all things” is thus impossible, as it would immediately compel speculative reason to run against its own correlational limits that prevent it from thinking the end of thought.

The Heideggerian “strong” version of human finitude is, on the other hand, rooted in the existential temporality that structures *Dasein*’s factical situatedness and its orientation towards a futural dimension of possibilities, delimited by death as the ultimate possibility of *Dasein*’s own non-being. In this sense of finitude, human fulfillment or “properness” (*Eigentlichkeit*), that which is most proper to the situated and finite human being, consists in her being appropriated (*ereignet*) into the situated and finite event of meaningfulness; the most appropriate human destination or destiny is to be the “addressee” or recipient of being.

The human being and being are assigned [*übereignet*] to each other. They belong to each other. . . . We must experience simply this lending [*Eignen*] in which the human being and being lend themselves to each other [*einander geeignet sind*], that is, we must enter into what we call the event [*Ereignis*]. . . . The event is the reach [*Bereich*] . . . through which the human being and being reach [*erreichen*] each other in their essence [*Wesen*].⁴⁵

Even this teleology of human being intertwines with a certain eschatology, a certain “end of the world.” Since “world” is here no longer the Kantian universal community of rational moral agents but rather a plurality of interlocking but singular worlds, correlating with singular instances of human being-in-the-world, death, as the temporal limit of *my* horizon of possibilities, is also the end of *a* world, *my* world. Since there is no impersonal transcendental subjectivity but *Dasein* is “in each instance mine” (*je meines*), situated and finite, one’s own death is the end of *the* world, the only accessible one.⁴⁶ This is perhaps most succinctly stated by Wittgenstein, whom Meillassoux points out as the second main

representative of strong correlationism, in his *Tractatus*: “[I]n death . . . the world does not change, but ceases. Death is not an event in life. Death is not lived through.”⁴⁷ It is more vividly expressed in Derrida’s foreword to *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*, a compilation of addresses on the occasion of the deaths of several of his friends. “Death,” Derrida writes,

declares, each time, *the end of the world in totality*, . . . the end of the world *itself*, of the only world there is, each time. Singularly. Irreversibly. For the other and, in a strange way, for the temporary survivor who endures the impossible experience of death. . . . [D]eath, death itself, if there is such a thing, leaves no room whatsoever, not the least possibility, for the singular and unique world to be replaced or to survive, the “singular and unique” that makes each living being (animal, human, or divine) a singular and unique living being.⁴⁸

For both versions of correlationism, the “end of the world” thus has the function of a teleological limit, an “end” grasped only in terms of human orientedness toward an impossible experience of completion and closure, toward an end of time that as such remains inconceivable for a temporal being. Meillassoux’s speculative materialism, by contrast, challenges the very question of the “ends” of human existence, based on implicit teleological ideas of purposiveness: Accepting the thesis of absolute contingency as the eternal truth about all things prevents one from relating to human existence “as if” it had an inherent purpose or end, even a merely regulative one. From that moment, the speculative question concerning the *reason* for human existence also ceases to be an impossible or meaningless metaphysical problem that must be transformed into the correlational question concerning the aim, ideal, or meaning of existence. On the contrary, it becomes once more a philosophical question of fundamental importance to which speculative materialism provides a very simple and concise answer: There is no reason whatsoever, since the existence of human beings as rational and meaning-experiencing subjects is a purely contingent fact.

Instead of laughing or smiling at questions like “Where do we come from?” “Why do we exist?” we should ponder instead the remarkable fact that the replies “From nothing. For nothing” really *are* answers. . . . There is no longer a mystery, not because there is no longer a problem, but because there is no longer a reason.⁴⁹

As Kant himself acknowledges, without a teleological idea of human ends, we have no need for the idea of an end of the world. In fact, Meillassoux shows that the very notion of an “end of all things” is logically excluded by the principle of absolute contingency, which entails that at all times *something* contingent must exist, rather than nothing: All things cannot cease to be, since then there would no longer be anything capable of not being.⁵⁰ For speculative materialism, too, the end of time is an impossible concept—not because the correlation is irreducibly temporally structured, but because time as the absolute dimension of the infinite succession of contingent things and facts is an irreducible feature of contingency.⁵¹

Moreover, once strong correlationism’s understanding of being as irreducibly correlated with the finite and situated existence of thinking and of temporality as a structure of this correlation are abandoned, death is no longer understood as an end of the world or as an end of time. While Meillassoux’s main concern lies with the conceivability of an “ancestral” reality prior to the emergence of sentient life, he notes that the same applies to “possible events that are *ulterior* to the extinction of the human species.”⁵² My death, as well as the death of *everybody*—the end of humankind, the death of all beings capable of thinking and experiencing meaningfulness and purpose—become perfectly possible and conceivable events within endless time. The consequences of this have been intimated by Ray Brassier, another name often associated with “speculative realism,” in *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (2007), which highlights the possible extinction of humankind as the central theme of a new and emancipatory philosophical nihilism. Death is now thematized as the biological demise of the human species, even of all terrestrial life, that no finite and situated

correlation can survive but which would not affect the thing-in-itself in its absolute essence in the least. "Nihilism," Brassier exclaims, "is not an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity. Thinking has interests that do not coincide with those of living."⁵³

Speculative Eschatology: The God to Come

Meillassoux's speculative materialism thus introduces a transformed and paradoxical perspective on the discourses of the end orienting post-Kantian thought. It accepts the thesis of the end of ontotheological metaphysics, but not that of the end of absolutes, and most decidedly rejects declarations of an end of modernity. The return of absolutizing speculative thought, Meillassoux claims, precisely offers modernity an opportunity to recover from the profound "schism" between its "Copernican," mathematized science and its "Ptolemaic," correlationist philosophy; this legitimates speculative materialism's claim to be the true calling of modernity, the true "Copernican revolution" in philosophy.⁵⁴

And yet, even as it thus negates, in a rediscovered "superior" and "apocalyptic" tone, the foundations of critical philosophy—the finitude of speculative reason and the moral necessity of a practical teleology of the human being and the world—this new Meillassouxian materialism also proposes a new kind of philosophical eschatology, indeed, a new hope of miraculous salvation. One of the most surprising consequences of the speculative thesis of absolute contingency is the rational legitimation of awaiting *miracles*. A considerable portion of *After Finitude* is dedicated to arguing that the correct answer to Hume's problem concerning the validity of inductive reasoning is to affirm that the laws of nature, in the sense of hitherto observed regularities in causal connections, are just as contingent and capable of change as any individual things.⁵⁵ The laws of nature have no a priori hold on what we are allowed to hope from the future. Phenomena that are completely unpredictable, unexpected, or even physically impossible in the light of current empirical knowledge are rationally just as possible as any

other, more regular occurrences. In published excerpts from the manuscript of his announced forthcoming magnum opus, *Divine Inexistence: Essay on the Virtual God*, Meillassoux mentions the emergence of biological life and that of sentient life as examples of such (in retrospect) completely unmotivated *ex nihilo* events.⁵⁶

Against the Kantian premise that the structure of our practical reason is such that it inherently needs to postulate teleological ideals in order to make moral agency rational, one of Meillassoux's principal, but still unelaborated, aims is to provide a radical alternative account of a morality based entirely on *hope*. In his 2006 essay "Spectral Dilemma," which allegedly anticipates some of the central themes of *Divine Inexistence*, Meillassoux revisits the classical problem of theodicy by calling our attention to the problem of striking injustices—in particular, "essential deaths," deaths so horrible, unacceptable, and irreconcilable that they keep haunting survivors as "essential specters."⁵⁷ To this "spectral dilemma," an atheistic approach is just as incapable of offering a satisfactory resolution as a religious one: Either there is a divine providence that has permitted these terrible injustices and is thus unfit to reconcile us to them, even if it has the power to do so, or there is no reconciling providence at all. The third, alternative resolution held out by Meillassoux, rationally justified through his principle of contingency, is a legitimate but unfounded hope for the completely unmotivated and miraculous future emergence of such a divine power—of the intervention of a god "to come" (*Dieu à venir*), a divinity who does not *yet* exist but, once existent, would have the capacity to bring about divine justice, even to resurrect the "essential dead." Nonetheless, such a miraculous advent cannot be the object of faith or conviction, as it will necessarily remain purely contingent, neither more nor less plausible than any other coherently conceivable event.

What is important in this brief sketch is that in the place of the Kantian regulative "moral faith" in a teleologically ordained world that will ultimately result in moral perfection—demanded by practical reason but without any possible empirical basis—speculative materialism argues for the legitimacy of a completely unfounded "moral hope" of a moral improvement and redemption of the world or, rather, for the emergence of a new world of justice based on a divine

intervention.⁵⁸ As Meillassoux puts it in the manuscript excerpts from *Divine Inexistence*:

I propose that *the* [Kantian] *kingdom of ends* . . . *ought to be rethought as the anticipation by humans of the possible advent of a novelty ulterior to themselves*. . . . This awaiting [of a world of divine justice] is not faith, since the event that serves as its object of hope is explicitly determined as a possibility that can be produced *or not* produced. No necessity, no probability, can guarantee its advent. But no impossibility and no improbability can discourage us from anticipating that it might happen.⁵⁹

In these excerpts, Meillassoux also briefly delineates a striking new form of humanism. The fact that human contingency excludes any particular inherent aims or purposes of human existence does not mean that an important dignity and value cannot be attributed to human beings. This value consists in the simple fact that of all contingent beings, humans are, in fact, the first ones to become aware of the eternal truth of absolute contingency (in particular, after the introduction of speculative materialism).⁶⁰ But as religions and classical philosophies have always emphasized, mortality – susceptibility to sudden, unexpected, and unjust death – is in conflict with this dignity and ultimately incompatible with human self-esteem. Therefore, the “world of justice,” a world that would represent an essential qualitative improvement in comparison to the present one and for which we are inclined to hope, would be one of “immanent immortality” and of resurrection for those who have already died. The self-imposed task of thesis of “divine inexistence” is to legitimate this hope on strictly nonreligious and rational terms.⁶¹

The thesis according to which we live in a universe totally deprived of reasons and necessities, a world in which anything can happen, thus paradoxically bestows rational legitimacy on the Heideggerian hope of a new god arriving to save us, albeit in a very different sense from that intended by Heidegger.⁶² The Meillassouxian divinity to come is not the supreme, necessary, and perfect being

of scholastic metaphysics, not the hidden god of the mystagogues that only lets itself be intimated behind a veil of Isis, not a postulate of practical reason and object of moral faith, not the Heideggerian “ultimate god” as a nonsubstantial dimension or vector of meaningfulness, not the “postmodern,” purely potential god “without being,” but rather a “virtual” god who actually *can be* but for the moment, contingently, is not. The eventual emergence of such a perfectly just, omnipotent, and omniscient being would correspond to the Kantian moral end of the world, but would, nonetheless, be a *contingent* end, not the *eschaton* in the sense of an “end of days” but rather an event within infinite time.⁶³

Notes

¹ Immanuel Kant, “Von einem neuerdings erhobenen vornehmen Ton in der Philosophie” [1796], in *Kant’s Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 8: *Abhandlungen nach 1781* (Berlin: Reimer, 1912), pp. 387–406; “On a Recently Prominent Tone of Superiority in Philosophy,” trans. Peter Heath, in *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*, Henry Allison and Peter Heath (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 429–45.

² Johann Georg Schlosser, *Plato’s Briefe nebst einer historischen Einleitung und Anmerkungen* (Königsberg: Nikolovius, 1795), pp. 180–84n.

³ Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *David Hume über den Glauben oder Idealismus und Realismus: Ein Gespräch* (Breslau: Loewe, 1787), pp. 200–2.

⁴ In the previous year, Fichte had articulated a first version of his notion of an intellectual intuition (*intellektuelle Anschauung*) in which the absolute ego posits itself; Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Review of *Aenesidemus oder über die Fundamente der vom Herrn Prof. Reinhold in Jena gelieferten Elementarphilosophie*, by G. E. Schulze [1794], in *Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s sämtliche Werke*, vol. 1, J. H. Fichte (ed.) (Berlin: Veit & Co., 1845), pp. 10, 16; Review of *Aenesidemus* by G. E. Schulze, in *Early Philosophical Writings*, translated and edited by Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 65, 70.

⁵ Kant, “Von einem neuerdings erhobenen vornehmen Ton,” p. 398; “On a Recently Prominent Tone,” p. 438.

⁶ Kant, "Von einem neuerdings erhobenen vornehmen Ton," p. 405; "On a Recently Prominent Tone," p. 444.

⁷ On Kant's concept of ontotheology, see Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* [1781/87], Jens Timmermann (ed.) (Hamburg: Meiner, 1998), pp. 699–708; *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 583–89 [A 631–42, B 659–70].

⁸ Immanuel Kant, "Der Streit der Fakultäten" [1798], in *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7 (Berlin: Reimer, 1907), p. 70; "The Conflict of the Faculties," translated by Mary J. Gregor and Robert Anchor, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 289.

⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urtheilskraft* [1790], in *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5 (Berlin: Reimer, 1913), pp. 195–98, 351–54, 356; *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Paul Guyer (ed.), translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 80–83, 225–28, 230.

¹⁰ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, pp. 870–75; *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp. 698–701 [A 845–51, B 873–79].

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1983), p. 58; "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy," translated by John P. Leavey Jr., in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (eds.) (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 48.

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, pp. 830, 832; *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp. 672–73 [A 795, 797, B 823, 825].

¹³ G. W. F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 21: *Wissenschaft der Logik: Die objektive Logik*, vol. 1: *Die Lehre vom Sein* [1832], Friedrich Hogemann and Walter Jaeschke (eds.) (Hamburg: Meiner, 1985), pp. 14, 31, 47; *The Science of Logic*, translated and edited by George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 16, 27, 41.

¹⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen: Ausgewählte Nachschriften und Manuskripte*, vol. 9: *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. 4: *Philosophie des Mittelalters und der neueren Zeit* [1825–26], Pierre Garniron and Walter Jaeschke (eds.) (Hamburg: Meiner, 1986), pp. 174–79; *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 1825–1826*, vol. 3: *Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, Robert F. Brown (ed.), translated by R. F. Brown, J. M. Stewart, and H. S. Harris (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 254–58.

¹⁵ See Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 25: *Phänomenologische Interpretation von Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft* [1927–28], third edition, Ingrid Gölter (ed.) (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1995), pp. 97–102; *Phenomenological Interpretation of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 67–70.

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* [1929], sixth edition (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1998), pp. 15–17, 228–31; *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, translated by Richard Taft (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 10–11, 160–62.

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, p. 1; *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, p. 1.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* [1927], eighteenth edition (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2001), pp. 323–31; *Being and Time*, translated by Joan Stambaugh, translation revised by Dennis Schmidt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), pp. 309–16.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 24: *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* [1927], third edition, Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (ed.) (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1997), pp. 323–24; *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 228.

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, “Protokoll zu einem Seminar über den Vortrag ‘Zeit und Sein’ ” [1962], in *Zur Sache des Denkens*, fourth edition (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000), p. 34; “Summary of a Seminar on the Lecture ‘Time and Being’,” translated by Joan Stambaugh, in *On Time and Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 32.

²¹ On the literal senses of “absolute,” see Martin Heidegger, “Hegels Begriff der Erfahrung” [1942–3], in *Holzwege*, eighth edition, Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (ed.) (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2003), p. 136; “Hegel’s Concept of Experience,” in *Off the Beaten Track*, translated and edited by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 102.

²² On the “other inception,” see, e.g., Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 65: *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)* [1936–38], Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (ed.) (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1989), pp. 4–6, 55, 57–60, 167–224; *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, translated by Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), pp. 6–8, 44, 46–48, 131–76.

²³ Martin Heidegger, “Protokoll zu einem Seminar,” p. 53; “Summary of a Seminar,” p. 49 (translation modified).

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, "Protokoll zu einem Seminar," p. 58; "Summary of a Seminar," p. 54 (translation modified).

²⁵ Alain Badiou, *Logiques des mondes: l'Être et l'événement*, 2 (Paris: Seuil, 2006), p. 561; *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2, translated by Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 535.

²⁶ Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), pp. 323–29; *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, translated by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 340–47.

²⁷ Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, pp. 351–54; *The Order of Things*, pp. 371–74.

²⁸ Alain Badiou, Preface to *Après la finitude: essai sur la nécessité de la contingence* by Quentin Meillassoux (Paris: Seuil, 2006), p. 11; Preface to *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* by Quentin Meillassoux (London: Continuum, 2008), p. vii.

²⁹ Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, p. 18; *After Finitude*, p. 5.

³⁰ Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, pp. 42–43, 48–49; *After Finitude*, pp. 30–31, 35–36. For Kant's argument for the intelligibility and justification 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, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, pp. 27–28; *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp. 115–16 [B xxvi–xxvii].

³¹ Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, pp. 26–27, 51–52, 71; *After Finitude*, pp. 10–11, 37–38, 51–52.

³² Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, pp. 42, 50–67; *After Finitude*, pp. 30, 36–48.

³³ Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 65, p. 509; *Contributions to Philosophy*, p. 400 (translation modified).

³⁴ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, pp. 261–62; *Being and Time*, pp. 250–1.

³⁵ See G. W. F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 20: *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* [1830], Wolfgang Bonsiepen and Hans Christian Lucas (eds.) (Hamburg: Meiner, 1968), pp. 97–98; *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline*, vol. 1: *Science of Logic*, translated and edited by Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 106–7 [§60].

³⁶ Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, pp. 74–82; *After Finitude*, pp. 54–60. For a more detailed reading of Meillassoux's argument against strong correlationism, see Jussi Backman, "Transcendental Idealism and Strong Correlationism: Meillassoux and the End of Heideggerian Finitude," in *Phenomenology and the Transcendental*, Sara Heinämaa, Mirja Hartimo, and Timo Miettinen (eds.) (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 276–94.

³⁷ Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, pp. 77–78; *After Finitude*, p. 57.

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- ³⁸ Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, pp. 141–42, 155–62; *After Finitude*, pp. 103–4, 112–17. Compare Alain Badiou, *L'Être et l'événement* (Paris : Seuil, 1988), pp. 7–27; *Being and Event*, translated by Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 1–20.
- ³⁹ Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, pp. 78–82; *After Finitude*, pp. 57–60.
- ⁴⁰ Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, pp. 82–83, 107–8; *After Finitude*, pp. 60–61, 79–80.
- ⁴¹ Immanuel Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* [1785], in *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4 (Berlin: Reimer, 1911), pp. 393–405; *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated and edited by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 7–18.
- ⁴² Immanuel Kant, “Das Ende aller Dinge” [1794], in *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 8, p. 331; “The End of All Things,” in *Religion and Rational Theology*, p. 224.
- ⁴³ Kant, “Das Ende aller Dinge,” p. 334; “The End of all Things,” p. 227.
- ⁴⁴ Kant, “Das Ende aller Dinge,” p. 335; “The End of all Things,” p. 228.
- ⁴⁵ Martin Heidegger, “Der Satz der Identität” [1957], in *Identität und Differenz*, twelfth edition (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2002), pp. 19, 24, 26; “The Principle of Identity”, translated by Joan Stambaugh, in *Identity and Difference* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 31–32, 36–37 (translation modified).
- ⁴⁶ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, pp. 42, 424–25; *Being and Time*, pp. 42, 403–4.
- ⁴⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [1921], translated by C. K. Ogden (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922), pp. 88, 160 [6.431, 6.4311].
- ⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, Foreword to *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* by Jacques Derrida (Paris: Galilée, 2003), pp. 9, 11. The compilation was first published in English as *The Work of Mourning*, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (ed.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), but Derrida's foreword is included only in the French edition.
- ⁴⁹ Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, pp. 151–52; *After Finitude*, p. 110.
- ⁵⁰ Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, pp. 101–3; *After Finitude*, pp. 75–76.
- ⁵¹ Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, p. 88; *After Finitude*, p. 64.
- ⁵² Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, p. 155; *After Finitude*, p. 112. On the problem of “ancestral” statements, see *Après la finitude*, pp. 13–38; *After Finitude*, pp. 1–27.
- ⁵³ Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. xi.
- ⁵⁴ Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, pp. 162–75; *After Finitude*, pp. 117–26.
- ⁵⁵ Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, pp. 111–53; *After Finitude*, pp. 82–111.

⁵⁶ Quentin Meillassoux, "Excerpts from *L'Inexistence divine*," translated by Graham Harman, in Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 175–87.

⁵⁷ Quentin Meillassoux, "Deuil à venir, dieu à venir," *Critique* no. 704–5 (2006): pp. 105–15; "Spectral Dilemma", translated by Robin Mackay, *Collapse*, vol. 4 (2008), pp. 261–76.

⁵⁸ On Kant's "moral faith" in God as a postulate of practical reason, see Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* [1788], in *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5 (Berlin: Reimer, 1913), pp. 124–32; *Practical Philosophy*, translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 239–46 [A 223–37].

⁵⁹ Meillassoux, "Excerpts from *L'Inexistence divine*," pp. 190, 192.

⁶⁰ Meillassoux, "Excerpts from *L'Inexistence divine*," pp. 208–14.

⁶¹ Meillassoux, "Excerpts from *L'Inexistence divine*," pp. 187–93.

⁶² See Martin Heidegger, "Spiegel-Gespräch mit Martin Heidegger" [1966], in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 16: *Reden und andere Zeugnisse eines Lebensweges*, Hermann Heidegger (ed.) (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2000), p. 671; "'Only a God Can Save Us': *Der Spiegel*'s Interview with Martin Heidegger," translated by Maria P. Alter and John D. Caputo, in *The Heidegger Controversy*, Richard Wolin (ed.) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 107. For a contrast between the notions of divinity in Heidegger, Badiou, and Meillassoux, see Jussi Backman, "From the Ultimate God to the Virtual God: Post-Ontotheological Perspectives on the Divine in Heidegger, Badiou, and Meillassoux," *META: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy*, Special Issue (2014), pp. 113–42.

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