

Why Not Nothing? Meillassoux's Second Figure of Factiality and Metaphysical Nihilism

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ACCORDING TO QUENTIN MEIL-
lassoux, the *principle of sufficient
reason* ('PSR') is a philosophi-
cal fifth postulate. His project is to carry out an "adventure"
analogous to that of non-Euclidean geometry, this time within
philosophy.¹ But whereas Lobachevsky developed his hyper-
bolic geometry without *first* trying to demonstrate that the
fifth postulate was false (i.e. without trying to demonstrate the
consistency of Euclidean geometry *sans* the fifth postulate,
with its negation), Meillassoux believes he *can* demonstrate
that the PSR is (absolutely) false.² Indeed, it is his view that
this proof involves a species of certainty – or at any rate fun-
damentality – not available in mathematics.³

This view has been the subject of considerable scrutiny, and

1 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2006), 92.

2 Ibid, 60.

3 Graham Harman and Quentin Meillassoux, "Interview with Quentin Meillassoux (August 2010)," in Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux. Philosophy in the Making*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 169.

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I examine it briefly below (section §3). However, my primary interest is in what Meillassoux takes to *follow* from the falsity of the PSR. This is the subject of sections §4 and §5.

§2. The main target of *After Finitude* is a view Meillassoux calls ‘correlationist’ – for whom

thought cannot get outside itself in order to compare the world as it is ‘in itself’ to the world as it is ‘for us’, and thereby distinguish what is a function of our relation to the world from what belongs to the world alone.⁴

This general characterisation covers a broad range of different positions. (Whether it does so appositely or tendentiously is presently moot.) Meillassoux assigns it to Berkeley as well as to Kant, even though only the latter is a correlationist according to him. Here is the difference: Berkeley’s scepticism involves an *ontological* thesis: there *are* no things-in-themselves – or at least, there are only ideas. This is his take on the ‘primacy of the correlate’, but it is not correlationism *per se*. The latter is a thesis about *cognitive accessibility* inaugurated by Hume. It tends towards a *fideistic* disavowal of knowledge/rational thought of the absolute. Thus, whilst in each case we begin with a ‘subjective’ premise, only for Berkeley – and other forms of what Meillassoux (in his whiggish history of modern philosophy) calls ‘subjectalism’ – does this yield an ontological conclusion.⁵ For Berkeley the limits of the cognitively accessible – of the thinkable or knowable – are limits on reality itself; whereas for the correlationist this is not the case.

Correlationism bars access to ‘the absolute’, but what is that? The term ‘absolute’ is polyvalent for Meillassoux, and implies a number of equivalences. The absolute is, firstly, what is independent of human thought, what could exist without

4 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 3-4.

5 Quentin Meillassoux, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign,” trans. Robin Mackay, (2012), 6.

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us.⁶ But it also connotes Kant's thing-in-itself, God, the World *qua* totality, absolute infinity, and Being understood as the common nature of all that is. All of these things are beyond the pale according to the correlationist, and for Meillassoux we ought to take this sceptical threat very seriously – seriously enough, at any rate, to forswear all subjectalist temptation.⁷

This hydra-like temptation is characterised as follows:

the metaphysical reply to correlationism consisted rather in absolutizing the subjective in general... This absolutism took various forms, leading each time to the absolutization of one or many determinate forms of subjectivity, or even of the subject in its totality. Sensation was absolutised (Maupertius' and Diderot's hylozoism), as was reason (Hegelian idealism), freedom (the Schelling of 1809), perception (Bergson and the image in itself, in the first chapter of *Matter and Memory*), will (Schopenhauer), wills in their mutual conflict (Nietzsche's will to power), the self in its initial germ state (Deleuze's 'larval selves' in *Difference and Repetition*), etc.⁸

Although he does not use the term 'subjectalism' in *After Finitude*, Meillassoux describes a similar family of positions that all "hypostatise some mental, sentient, or vital term: representation in the Leibnizian monad; Schelling's Nature, or the objective subject-object; Hegelian Mind; Schopenhauer's Will; the Will (or Wills) to Power in Nietzsche, perception loaded with memory in Bergson; Deleuze's Life, etc."⁹ These subjectalists agree with Meillassoux that the door of the correlationist *asylum ignorantiae* has been left ajar – that the absolute is knowable after all – but disagree over where it leads. The subjectalists – Meillassoux assures us – all bring us back to something "mental, sentient or vital", which serves as an enduring substrate that is independent of, and prior to, everything else – and which is, indeed, a necessary being,

6 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 28.

7 *Ibid.*, 38.

8 Meillassoux, "Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition," 3.

9 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 37.

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a being whose non-existence is strictly impossible. Against this Meillassoux confidently demurs: there is no such being.

At the centre of this disagreement is the concept of *facticity*, which Meillassoux considers sufficient to ensure the victory of the correlationist – with whom he enters into temporary alliance – over the subjectalist. But what is facticity, and how is this victory assured? In Kantian terms, facticity results from the receptivity of human knowledge, which guarantees our ignorance of how things are like independently of our mode of access to them. So, if we think of the thing-in-itself as providing the sufficient reason for the given, then it is the inaccessibility of *this* reason that facticity expresses. Yet, for all this, there may nevertheless *be* a reason lying (as it were) behind the given, and compelling it to be the way it is rather than any other way. This is what engenders the fideistic element of correlationism. Facticity is *not* the contingency of the given *per se*, nor knowledge of phenomenal contingency: it consists, rather, in our ignorance of why the invariants of the given are, or have to be, invariant.¹⁰ It's not that I *know* that things *can* change: rather, I *don't know* why they *can't*. More specifically, this ignorance is premised on our inability to *demonstrate* that these invariances are necessary.¹¹ It is this facticity that Meillassoux wants to reveal as 'absolute', meaning not merely a mark of human ignorance but a "real property whereby everything and every world is without reason, and is thereby capable of actually becoming otherwise without reason."¹² We have to show that what appears to lack a reason from our viewpoint – like suffering – really does lack a reason. In the case of my ungrounded existence, there is a possible world where I do not exist, and the same is true for any thing, fact, or occurrence. When facticity is revealed

10 The invariants of the given include such things as the "principle of causality, forms of perception, logical laws, etc." Ibid, 39. These invariants, in the different types of correlationism, are the analogues of Kant's categories. Ibid, 93.

11 Ibid, 38–9. All we can do is "describe" them.

12 Ibid, 53. See also p. 56: the absolute is the capacity to be other as such (as theorised by the correlationist).

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to be absolute in this sense, we are in a position to infer that God, the ultimate ground of things, does not exist.¹³

§3. It is virtually axiomatic for Meillassoux that, since the ontological argument (together with all causal necessity) has been ‘recused’, “we cannot take the idealist path”.¹⁴ He writes:

It is the irremediable facticity of the correlational forms which allows us to distinguish both claims [Hegelian and Kantian] in favour of the latter. For once one has refused any possibility of demonstrating the absolute necessity of these forms, it is impossible to proscribe the possibility that there could be an in-itself that differs fundamentally from what is given to us.¹⁵

I read this as saying that, unless the subjectalist can proscribe the possibility of *p*, she ought not believe that *p* is impossible. A proscription requires a demonstration, which is a deductive argument whose premises, although perhaps not themselves deduced from a certain base, are nevertheless accepted by the person at whom the argument is targeted. Since the subjectalist cannot proscribe the contingency *or* the necessity of the correlational invariances, the correct attitude is to withhold judgement.

Unfortunately, although this recusal is central to Meillassoux’s position, he has little to say in its defense. To clarify, here is the premise that Meillassoux extracts from correlationism to use against the subjectalist: we can’t know anything about things as they are in themselves (i.e. absolutely) *except* what we can *demonstrate*, i.e. what we can *cogently argue for*.¹⁶

¹³ Ibid, 65.

¹⁴ Ibid, 60, 91.

¹⁵ Ibid, 38–9.

¹⁶ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 148 [B23/4]: “The critique of reason thus finally leads necessarily to science; the dogmatic use of it without critique, on the contrary, leads to groundless assertions, to which one can oppose equally plausible ones, thus to skepticism... the contradictions of reason, which cannot be denied and which are

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In other words, the argument against subjectalism and the PSR is conditional upon the rejection of dogmatism. This must be kept in mind when we read the following:

One establishes the principle [of unreason] without deducing it, by demonstrating that anyone who contests it can do so only by presupposing it to be true, thereby refuting him or herself... The sceptic is only able to conceive of the difference between the 'in-itself' and the 'for-us' by submitting the 'for-us' to an absence of reason which presupposes the absoluteness of the latter.¹⁷

In other words: the sceptic presupposes that unreason is absolute. But (1) *which* sceptic is this, and (2) *how* exactly does she presuppose the falsity of the PSR? Look at how Meillassoux defends his assertion that the principle of unreason is more basic than any other; in particular, *more basic* than the absoluteness of the *principle of non-contradiction* (PNC). It is because *the correlationist* can contrast the *facticity* of the PNC with its absolutisation, i.e. she can allow that contradictions are unthinkable *for us* without thereby acknowledging their *absolute* impossibility.¹⁸ No similar contrast, Meillassoux tells us, is available in the case of facticity – since this would require a facticity *of* facticity, which is self-refuting insofar as it involves relativizing facticity in terms of its own absolutisation.

The point I wish to emphasise is that this line of reasoning *need* not trouble the subjectalist, for whom facticity is

also unavoidable in dogmatic procedure, have long since destroyed the authority of every previous metaphysics.”

17 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 61.

18 *Ibid.*, 43. I think it is fair to say that Meillassoux lacks a stable understanding of where the PNC is supposed to fit into his argument, given his shift from claiming that its absoluteness follows from the principle of unreason, to the weaker claim that the absoluteness of the principle of non-triviality (PNT) follows therefrom (p. 78); a concession which is then ignored in subsequent discussion of Hume's problem (e.g. p. 90), and has the feel of a late revision. Meillassoux also overlooks the fact that it is self-refuting to deny the absoluteness of the PNT, given that phenomena would be inconsistent if the PNT could be absolutely true.

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relativised by the necessity of correlation, *not* by more facticity. Notice that in the passage just quoted, the phrase “is only able to conceive the difference” refers to what the correlationist needs in order to argue against subjectalism. Again, *what the correlationist needs to conceive* is a difference that is ‘radical’ enough to differentiate her view from that of the subjectalist, for whom some correlate or other necessarily exists. Meillassoux claims – contentiously – that this difference won’t be radical *enough* without absolute facticity (i.e. what I elsewhere simply term ‘contingency’).¹⁹ But even if this is right, not everything the correlationist needs is *thereby* shown to be possible. Yes, if the recusal of subjectalism requires X, then X cannot be consistently denied by the correlationist, or by anyone else who wishes to recuse subjectalism. However, this is not a problem for the subjectalist unless she accepts the goal of demonstrating the absolute to the correlationist. The subjectalist who denies this – i.e. who *happily* accedes to a classical (e.g. Leibniz) or neo-classical (e.g. Hartshorne) metaphysics; who denies that demonstrability is the criterion of absolute knowledge/cognition – has no reason to recuse her own position, meaning that *something else* is needed if Meillassoux’s argument is to be more than just an *ad hominem* against correlationists and their fellow-travelers.²⁰

In any case, it is not obvious that the correlationist *does* need absolute facticity to ward off the subjectalist threat.²¹

19 Ibid, 57. Cf. Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound. Enlightenment and Extinction*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 66–7.

20 Cf. Paul W. Franks, *All or Nothing. Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 374.

21 Rae Langton reconstructs Kant’s argument for facticity (‘humility’) so that it requires the antecedent rejection of the PSR. However, on her view, contingency isn’t sufficient for humility anyway – because it’s compatible with fallible knowledge. See Rae Langton, *Kantian Humility. Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Rae Langton “Elusive Knowledge of Things in Themselves,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, special issue honoring David Lewis 82 (2004), 129–36. (My present point is that contingency isn’t necessary for humility – this means, in effect, that the argument for humility needn’t

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To start with, it does not (obviously) follow, if I could fail to know a truth p , that p is a contingent truth. Although sceptical scenarios often turn on the possible falsity of my belief, there is no easily generalizable moral to be drawn from this. My point: scepticism does not require that I could actually be *mistaken* in my belief – otherwise it would be impossible not to know any necessary truth that I believe. But this is implausible: I could flip a coin when deciding whether to believe a mathematical proposition or its negation, and my resulting belief surely would not constitute knowledge. Another example: take any mathematical truth and imagine making a subtle mistake in the proof you construct for it. You either do not actually know that truth, or you might have failed to know it – but it is a necessary truth nevertheless. Similarly, suppose there are unknowable mathematical truths, whatever exactly ‘unknowability’ amounts to. They are then necessary but unknowable. Finally, think of philosophy instead of mathematics. It is not crazy to sympathise with the correlationist’s pessimistic attitude towards metaphysical knowledge. The existence of deep and apparently irresolvable disagreement concerning every fundamental philosophical question lends considerable support to scepticism regarding knowledge of their answers – and this is quite independent of whether we think of the underlying truths as contingent or necessary. But insofar as this is the case, we can readily motivate a sceptical attitude towards subjectalism *without* any dependence upon absolute facticity.

§4. The present paper *presupposes* a satisfactory solution to this problem. Perhaps equipollence-type arguments *do*,

beg the question against Spinoza.) Regarding fallibilism, see Richard Popkin’s distinction between fallibilism and mitigated scepticism: each allows “probable truths about appearances”, but only for the latter does this not amount to, or facilitate, knowledge of the real nature of things. Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism. From Savonarole to Bayle*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 112, 114. Again, “scientific knowledge” is presented as knowledge of “phenomenal relationships” (p. 118), but only the fallibilist continues the “Aristotelian quest” to know things in themselves (p. 126).

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after all, depend upon absolute facticity for their efficacy. In any case, my aim is to show that, even if (a) the falsity of subjectalism is given, and (b) the correlationist must accept the principle of unreason, Meillassoux *still* fails to establish the truth of his own position, *speculative materialism*. I will do this by building a counter-model that is compatible with Meillassoux's argument, but which yields an interestingly different result. This counter-model relies crucially on the concept of a 'null world'.

Speculative materialism is characterised by the claim that contingency is the *only* necessity. This does not mean that it necessitates nothing – starting with the so-called “figures” of factuality. Rather: “We can only hope to develop an absolute knowledge – a knowledge of chaos which would not simply keep repeating that everything is possible – on condition that we produce necessary propositions about it besides that of its omnipotence.”²² These figures of factuality are intended to build upon the initial result of unreason itself, drawing out its consequences and illuminating its nature. The figures are attempts to show that omnipotence has its own internal logic – that it is an auto-normalizing rather than *pure* (and hence inconsistent) chaos.

Puzzles that arise when we think about omnipotence *as such* also arise here. For example, if contingency is unlimited, can it cease to be so? Could it become nothing whilst remaining itself? Meillassoux insists that chaos, although not limited by any *external* reality, is limited by its own nature, and must remain itself.²³ The contrasting position is that chaos needn't remain itself but could become otherwise without reason. For an example of this latter position, consider Markus Gabriel's reading of Schelling: freedom – which is here the analogue of Meillassoux's chaos – is only *absolutely* free if it is free from the necessity of remaining itself.²⁴ Taken literally, this

²² Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 66.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Markus Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology. Essays in German Idealism*, (Bloomsbury, 2011), 19.

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means that freedom must transcend *every* limit, including consistency (non-triviality) itself. On this reading, freedom amounts to an inconsistent superiority of contingency to *all* necessity – hence even to the necessity of contingency itself – a *pure possibility* that is free to become other than itself, and to do so, moreover, *without* thereby ceasing to be freedom. However, it is questionable whether *this* conception of absolute freedom – which constitutes one way of understanding the contingency of contingency, that is, the reflexivity of contingency – is coherent.

But then, supposing we don't want to give up the reflexivity of contingency, how else might we understand it? Two alternatives present themselves at this point. Either the contingency of contingency amounts to the *mere* facticity of its self-identity – which seems to be Gabriel's preference – or it amounts to the possibility of absolute nothingness. Each of these resonates somewhat with Schelling's position, though the former fits better with his vision of an apophatic *quasi*-subject that is somehow both anterior to all logical determination, yet nevertheless draped with predicates. In any case, since mere facticity is not contingency, there is an unsatisfying hint of equivocation in glossing the contingency of contingency in this way.

Why not nothing, then? Let us see how Meillassoux tries to exclude this possibility. For Meillassoux, speculative materialism is *uniquely* compatible with – and implicitly required by – the epistemological strictures of correlationism, i.e. it yields the *only* non-dogmatic absolute. However, the nature of this absolute cannot be transparently read off from the principle of unreason alone – a further argument is needed. Thus, according to Meillassoux's second "figure" of unreason, "it is absolutely necessary that the in-itself exists, and hence that the latter cannot dissolve into nothingness."²⁵ Meillassoux asserts that although no *determinate* material reality is absolute, it is nevertheless true that

25 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 71. Cf. Meillassoux, "Interview," 165.

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contingency is nothing outside of what is contingent – it is not a ‘free floating’ principle, but always a property of determinate beings. I thus establish that something must exist – and not pure nothingness – and that this something is not necessarily a thinking thing. This something that does not necessarily think is matter in general.²⁶

Similarly, he writes:

For although I can think the contingency of this existing thing, I cannot think the contingency of existence as such (or of the fact that something exists in general). Thus I am perfectly incapable of thinking the abolition of existence, and so becoming-inexistent is only conceivable as the becoming of a determinate existent, not as the becoming of existence in general.²⁷

If existence *as such* is contingent, Meillassoux argues, then facticity is just a fact, i.e. there is a facticity of facticity – and since we’ve already ruled this out by accepting the weak interpretation of the non-facticity of facticity (this being the minimum needed to avoid collapsing back into correlationism), we must conclude that the latter entails Meillassoux’s preferred strong interpretation, according to which existence is necessary. As such, the null world turns out to be inconceivable after all.

Call *metaphysical nihilism* the view that asserts the possibility of a null or empty world: empty of living things, stars and galaxies, space and time, all abstract objects, as well as truth and possibility. The null world, to be sure, is not a ‘world’ in the way that other possibilities are. It is not an object or an empty container or a stage without actors. This naturally leads to the worry that it is not a coherent or conceivable possibility – a worry that is virtually as old as philosophy itself.²⁸ Meillassoux appends his own argument to this long

26 Meillassoux, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition,” 13.

27 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 75-6.

28 Thus, for Parmenides, we cannot conceive nothingness, and so cannot countenance its possibility. Being and thought are co-extensive. Meillas-

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lineage of resistance.

There is a *prima facie* plausible objection against the conceivability of absolute nothingness: according to this objection, the *only* way the nihilist can distinguish her view from the anti-nihilist is through tacitly depending upon the possible *being* of nothingness, and thus contradicting herself. Put differently, the nihilist needs a way of distinguishing possible and impossible worlds *other* than in terms of (possible) being, such that the null world is classified amongst the former rather than the latter. The objection is that there is no such distinction available.

Of course, the nihilist doesn't just blithely assert that there could have *existed* a non-existent world, or anything along these lines. She tries to express her position without paradox – yet how, exactly? Suppose we say simply: being could have failed to be. Or: there could have not been anything. These formulations avoid ambiguity by having the negation precede the mention of being. But now consider: how do we distinguish this possibility from an impossibility? Fundamentally, if anything has being, then something is a (metaphysical) subject of predication, i.e. something has properties. This makes it difficult for the nihilist to express her position coherently. She can't say, for example, that possibilities are possible *realities* – at least not if this is taken as meaning that there could be a reality involving everything lacking reality. We can call this problem of distinguishing possible and impossible worlds the *demarcation problem*. The nihilist who wants to maintain the conceivable possibility of absolute nothingness faces the challenge of solving it.

Meillassoux's conclusion, we have seen, is that the possibility of absolute nothingness is inconceivable. Compare this

soux identifies this as the postulate that (strong) correlationism seeks to overturn (Ibid, 44). For Bergson nothingness is always the absence of some particular thing, never of all things taken together – hence for him too absolute nothingness is unthinkable. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover, 1998), 280–81. The possibility of a null world is a “fundamental illusion of the understanding” that depends on transposing the social (and ultimately subjective) practice of negation into the speculative sphere (pp. 275, 287, 291).

conclusion, once again, with the alternative Gabriel finds in the late Schelling: according to Gabriel, for contingency to truly have the last word there can't be any guarantee that even *it* is necessary.²⁹ Rather, to be *completely* free of dogmatism we must finally admit a contingency of *all* necessity, and hence a contingency of the necessity *of* contingency.³⁰ But what can this mean if not that contingency could have failed to be? Above I noted that for Schelling it seems to involve an eschatological regression into incomprehensible necessity. If this is true then there is some justice in Meillassoux's verdict that applying facticity to itself, in order to avoid the necessity of contingency, amounts to relativizing it to the necessity of correlation, in this case Schelling's God-to-come/absolute freedom. Meillassoux's complaint is just that this cannot be viewed as a response to the correlationist on her own terms, but must be seen as a dogmatic regression. As Nietzsche said of Schopenhauer at a similar juncture, Schelling only succeeds with "dictatorial tone" in making it so that "a completely dark and ungraspable *x* is draped with predicates".³¹ A similar problem of expressibility afflicts Gabriel's position.

However, this by itself does not show the *unique* compatibility of speculative materialism with the epistemological strictures of the correlationist. As I have been saying, there is an alternative reading of the facticity of facticity available here, one that does *not* involve the necessity of correlation, and according to which the contingency of contingency is just the contingency of existence – this being what Meillassoux denies. Whereas Meillassoux seeks to ontologise *weak* correlationism, the contingency of existence more closely resembles an ontologisation of *strong* correlationism – especially insofar as we take seriously (without capitulating in

29 Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology*, 130.

30 *Ibid*, 132-4.

31 Quoted in Alberto Toscano, *The Theatre of Production. Philosophy Between Kant and Deleuze*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 92. Cf. Eugene Thacker, "Dark Life. Negation, Nothingness and the Will-To-Life in Schopenhauer," *Parrhesia* (2011), 12, 21: the attempt to think the in-itself as some sort of life requires a "minimal equivocacy" with regard to phenomenal life.

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the face of) the problems associated with thinking absolute nothingness.³² Even if absolute nothingness is unthinkable in some sense – a sense corresponding to the limitations of finite thought (whatever exactly those are) – the possibility of the unthinkable remains thinkable for the strong correlationist. So there is at least one sense in which nihilism is – albeit indirectly – conceivable.

This is *not* to say that the strong correlationist *can* avoid absolutising facticity after all – I am not presently trying to undermine *this* part of Meillassoux’s argument. My point is that, even granting the need to absolutise facticity, it looks like the strong correlationist has a *choice* in how to go about renouncing her position. She can, specifically, *accept* the possibility of this finitely unthinkable nothingness, which in turn guarantees the contingency of contingency. As such, she does not have to become a speculative materialist in order to avoid being a subjectalist.

The upshot of this is that we should distinguish between two ways of applying facticity to itself – one involving correlation and the other not – which Meillassoux seems to have run together. On the basis of this distinction we can observe that the contingency of existence *does* entail the facticity of facticity – but that this makes facticity *more*, not less, absolute. What I am suggesting is that Meillassoux’s own argumentation – supposing it is successful in showing that the strong correlationist cannot think the possibility of the unthinkable *except* by dint of the unreason of the real – *underdetermines* the decision to opt for speculative materialism, *even if the falsity of subjectalism is given*. For according to an *ontologised* strong correlationism, contingency is *neither* relative to the

32 Strong correlationism is characterised by the assertion that “it is unthinkable that the unthinkable be impossible.” Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 41. If the unthinkability of $\neg p$ entails the thinkability of p , then it follows from the unthinkability of the impossibility of the unthinkable that we can think the possibility of the unthinkable. The strong correlationist offers this as a response to the subjectalist assertion of the necessity of correlation. That is, strong correlationism is an attempt to escape, via facticity, from subjectalism, precisely so as to preserve the Wholly Other against the impossibility of the uncorrelated.

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necessity of correlation *nor* itself (*contra* Meillassoux) a sort of necessary existence, but instead relative to the possibility of nothingness that confirms it whilst excluding all necessary existence. As a slogan: contingency is necessary *because* it is contingent.

This position bears some resemblance to the one recently identified by Martin Hägglund in the work of Jacques Derrida.³³ It can also be compared with Thacker's description of Schopenhauer:

Instead of asserting an Absolute Life (grounded by its own principle of sufficiency, and driven by an ontology of overpresence), Schopenhauer will drop the bottom out of the ontology of generosity. What remains is, quite simply, nothing. No overflowing life force, no pantheistic becoming, no immanent principle of life running throughout all of Creation. Just nothing.³⁴

Thacker adds, provocatively, that Schopenhauer's concept of the Will-to-Life, which withdraws from any characterisation, "ultimately points to a principle of *insufficient* reason at its core."³⁵ Admittedly, Thacker immediately goes on to say (albeit not in a dictatorial tone) that this nothing is a "paradoxical and enigmatic something." But why not persist with the idea of *absolute* nothingness?

So far I have presented a challenge to the conceivable possibility of absolute nothingness, before showing how to respond to this challenge on the basis of an ontologised strong correlationism. This illustrates a significant flaw in Meillassoux's argument. Nevertheless, it would be much nicer if we didn't have to acquiesce to the premise that we can't finitely think the possibility of a null world. Indeed, I

33 Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism. Derrida and the Time of Life*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 47: the Kantian apocalypse reveals an indestructible thing in itself beyond the limits of knowledge; whereas for Derrida the apocalypse destroys everything without remainder. It is the latter possibility I am interested in.

34 Thacker, "Dark Life," 18-19.

35 *Ibid.*, 21.

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don't believe that the possibility of the null world is really inconceivable in any significant sense. To the demarcation problem formulated above I respond: anything that is not contradictory or inconsistent is possible. Since we define the null world as lacking any true (or false) propositions, we *ipso facto* conceive it as lacking true contradictions - that explains why it is classified as possible rather than impossible. To be sure, it doesn't follow from *this* that the null world *is* (fully) conceivable, or that it is possible. To show that it *is*, at least, conceivable, it will suffice to show that its possibility is entailed by something else that is conceivable (non-contradictory); and the obvious candidate is just the conceivability of the contingency of everything taken together. I'll now give a sketch of the argument, which I've borrowed from Graham Priest.

§5. The contingency of contingency can be fruitfully compared with the Buddhist doctrine of the *emptiness of emptiness*. To begin with I stipulate that, whatever exactly the property of emptiness amounts to, it entails lacking intrinsic or self-existence. Now, if it is true that necessary existence is possible *iff* something has intrinsic existence; and if we understand emptiness as the lack of intrinsic existence in this sense, then the emptiness of emptiness (i.e. universal emptiness) is equivalent to the contingency of contingency (i.e. universal contingency). An interesting feature of this comparison is that metaphysical nihilism is shown to be a consequence of *pan-relationism*, the view that being is necessarily relational.

As Priest laconically puts it, to "be empty is to exist only as the locus in a field of relations."³⁶ He observes that it is often thought that taking *everything* to be empty leads to a vicious regress, as follows: if the existence of a thing is constituted only by the existence of other things, then since "there is nothing that grounds this process, there is nothing that ultimately constitutes the existence of anything. Nothing,

³⁶ Graham Priest, "The Structure of Emptiness," *Philosophy East and West* (2009), 59:4, 467-480, 473.

therefore, exists. Emptiness entails nihilism.”³⁷ Priest denies that this regress is vicious, because universal emptiness can be shown to be distinct from nothingness. Priest constructs his model as follows.³⁸ Start with a set of objects and relations between those objects. For a particular object X in that set, there is a set of relations corresponding to it – the relations entered into or engendered by that object. Now think of the relation R_L that holds between these relations. This relation between the relations of the object X gives us an equivalence class, which Priest terms a *locus* of relations.

Now, for each object in the set there is a corresponding equivalence class, which together are the loci of that set. According to Priest, “we may dispense with objects and the relationships between them, and operate equivalently in terms of loci and the relationships between these. The ontology of independent objects may be replaced by an ontology of loci.”³⁹ If we then take these loci and their relations, and apply the same analysis again, we see that they too can be understood purely in terms of loci and relationships between loci. If we repeat the analysis to the limit, we end up with a model of the proposition ‘everything is empty’. Note that the structure of emptiness applies even to sets and other abstract objects, as well as to emptiness itself, understood here as the totality of things.⁴⁰ Crucially, instead of the structureless void of the empty set, we have a very rich, intricate structure. The difference can be noted in the fact that emptiness, since it contains itself, is a non-well-founded set; whereas the empty set, having no members, is a well-founded set.

Obviously I am giving a very compressed version of the argument – mostly because I am not enough of a set theorist to present it thoroughly. But as far as I can tell, the set-theoretical machinery allows us to build a consistent model of universal emptiness; and given the interpretation placed upon that

37 Ibid, 471.

38 Ibid, 473.

39 Ibid, 474.

40 Ibid, 476.

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Buddhist doctrine here, it follows that it is conceivably possible for there to be absolutely nothing.

§6. The PSR is a philosophical fifth postulate. Meillassoux has shown this more emphatically than anyone. However, the adventure of ‘non-Euclidean philosophy’ has only just begun. The true consequences of giving up the PSR remain to be determined.

This paper has been defensive and prospective in nature: for all that I’ve shown, it may yet turn out that Meillassoux *can* repair his second figure of factuality, and that his conclusion is substantively correct. Of course, I don’t think this is what will happen. To my mind, speculative materialism constitutes a failure of nerve that perpetuates the distorting influence of the PSR on philosophical thought. To this I respond, reading Levinas against himself: “The absolutely foreign alone can instruct us.”⁴¹ Admittedly, I’ve hardly begun to describe the alternative opened up by taking metaphysical nihilism seriously. This is what must now be done. The promise of this alternative is a novel development of what Gabriel calls the “metaphysical truth of skepticism [that] consists both in a realization of our finitude and in the adjacent insight into the nonexistence of the world.”⁴² If this promise can be made good, we will have learnt how to lose the world and find nothing.

41 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 73. A number of Levinas’ observations can be fruitfully repurposed if we interpret the Wholly Other as absolute nothingness rather than God. For example (p. 40): “The void that breaks totality can be maintained against an inevitably totalizing and synoptic thought only if thought finds itself faced with an other refractory to categories.”

42 Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology*, 1–2.