

Speculating on the Absolute: on Hegel and Meillassoux¹

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“To reconcile thought and absolute” - this is the enjoiner with which Meillassoux closes *After Finitude*.² The Hegelian tenor of this statement is impossible to miss, as is Meillassoux’s reference to the most famous speculative philosopher of the absolute in his own use of these terms. Is Meillassoux being ironic? Is Hegel not the ‘correlationist’ philosopher *pur sang*?

In fact, Hegel’s role in *After Finitude* is not very clear.³ To the casual reader it may appear that Meillassoux’s attitude towards Hegel is generally dismissive. The scattered refer-

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- 1 I am grateful to Fintan Neylan and an anonymous reviewer for comments on an earlier draft of this essay.
 - 2 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 128 (henceforth quoted as AF).
 - 3 In order to focus on the relation between Hegel and Meillassoux I am going to presume the reader’s familiarity with *After Finitude*. Many excellent summaries, commentaries and criticisms of this work have already been written. To name a few: Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 49–94; Adrian Johnston, ‘Hume’s Revenge: À Dieu, Meillassoux?’, in *The Speculative Turn*, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 91–113, http://www.re.press.org/book-files/OA_Version_Speculative_Turn_9780980668346.pdf; Peter Hallward, ‘Anything Is Possible: A Reading of Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*’, in *The Speculative Turn*, 131–41; Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 6–53.

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ences are mostly negative, and seem to show that Meillassoux endorses the standard French reading of Hegel as a thinker of absolute totality: Hegel is “the thinker of absolute identity, of the identity of identity and difference”.⁴ Within Meillassoux’s own theoretical framework, Hegel seems to play the role of the arch-correlationist, who hypostasizes the subject-object correlation in the form of spirit (*Geist*).⁵ Although Meillassoux and Hegel are both *speculative* thinkers, in that they both claim that thought can think the absolute,⁶ Meillassoux’s speculative *materialism* seeks to demonstrate that the absolute can be thought independently of thought,⁷ while he thinks Hegel’s speculative idealism postulates the absolute necessity of the correlation between thought and being.⁸ Hegel is therefore the typical example of what he calls, in *Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition*, ‘subjectalism’: “Hegelian idealism is obviously the paradigm of such a metaphysics of the Subject thought as Absolute.”⁹

Despite this strongly critical attitude, however, it is clear that Hegel is an important influence on Meillassoux’s thought. Beyond Meillassoux’s appropriation of Hegel’s terminology,

4 AF 70.

5 AF 37. Brassier translates *Geist* as ‘Mind’.

6 This is Meillassoux’s definition of ‘speculative’: “Let us call ‘speculative’ every type of thinking that claims to be able to access some form of absolute, and let us call ‘metaphysics’ every type of thinking that claims to be able to access some form of absolute being, or access the absolute through the principle of sufficient reason” (AF 34).

7 AF 36. See also Quentin Meillassoux, ‘Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition’ (Freie Universität Berlin, 20 April 2012), 2;5, <http://oursecretblog.com/txt/QMpaperApr12.pdf> (henceforth quoted as IRR).

8 AF 37-38.

9 IRR 8. In order to clarify the terminology used in AF, Meillassoux distinguished in IRR between correlationism and subjectalism. Correlationists are thinkers who think that an absolute reality outside of thought may exist but that it is impossible to think it, while subjectalists claim that it is possible to think the absolute because thought, subjectivity, life or will (depending on the thinker) is in some sense absolute, and there is no reality outside it (IRR 3-4). On this revised terminology, Hegel is therefore, on Meillassoux’s account, a subjectalist but no longer a correlationist.

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there are in fact also important similarities in their approach and their conclusions: as Žižek remarks, Meillassoux's endeavour is "much closer to Hegel than it may appear."¹⁰ Meillassoux himself acknowledges Hegel's strong influence on his philosophical education in a number of places. In *Divine Inexistence*, he mentions that he has written an unpublished book on Hegel, *Raison et ésotérisme chez Hegel*.¹¹ Graham Harman mentions in an interview with Meillassoux that the latter told him, on an earlier occasion, that Hegel is his "unaddressed hidden source"; Meillassoux responds that "Hegel, along with Marx, was my only true master."¹²

Of course, the fact that Meillassoux admits to being influenced by Hegel does not mean that he does not ultimately reject his approach. However, it does give us reason to think that there is something to be gained from exploring the relation between them. Despite the obvious connection, commentary on Hegel's role in Meillassoux's work has been relatively scant.¹³ The aim of this article is, therefore, to give a systematic account of Meillassoux's relation to and his criticism of Hegel, of their similarities as well as their differences. In the first part I will summarize Meillassoux's criticisms of Hegel and then discuss the role Hegel plays in the argument of *After Finitude*. The second part will look at the similarities

10 Slavoj Žižek, 'Interview (with Ben Woodard)', in *The Speculative Turn*, 411.

11 Quentin Meillassoux, 'Divine Inexistence' (translated excerpts), in Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 204.

12 Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, 168.

13 As far as I have been able to establish (looking only at sources published in English), Žižek's reading of Meillassoux in *Less than Nothing* (London: Verso, 2012, 625-647) is the most sustained engagement with the topic. There are also a few articles which deal with specific aspects of the relation between Hegel and Meillassoux: John Van Houdt, 'The Necessity of Contingency or Contingent Necessity: Meillassoux, Hegel and the Subject', *Cosmos and History* 7, no. 1 (2011); Kirill Chepurin, 'Geist, Contingency and the Future of God', Higher School of Economics Research Paper WP BPR 16/HUM/2013 (2013), <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2227293>; Josef Moshe, 'The Night in Which All Dinosaurs Wear Nightcaps', *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 7, no. 3 (2013).

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between Hegel and Meillassoux, in particular with regards to the possibility of absolute knowledge, their criticism of Kant's distinction between the world of appearance and things in themselves, and the principle of sufficient reason. The third part will consider Žižek's and Gabriel's criticisms of Meillassoux in relation to his reading of Hegel and German Idealism.

Part 1: Hegel according to Meillassoux

1.1 Meillassoux's criticism of Hegel

As I have mentioned, judging from the references to Hegel in *After Finitude* Meillassoux's interpretation of Hegel is quite traditional. Let us look at these critical remarks in a little more detail.

Firstly, Meillassoux claims that Hegel represents a kind of metaphysics which "consists in *absolutizing the correlation itself*."¹⁴ On Meillassoux's account, the problem correlationism poses to traditional forms of dogmatic metaphysics or naive realism is that it seems impossible for thought to get outside of itself: how can we claim to think things which are independent from thought, when we can precisely only ever think them? Anything which we suppose to 'really exist' can only appear to us as mediated by, or correlated with, our subjective mode of experience.¹⁵ One way of dealing with this correlationist argument is what Meillassoux calls 'subjectalism'. Subjectalists, of which he claims Hegel is the paradigmatic example, argue that objective reality is itself in some way subjective, or that human subjectivity is just a special case of a more general principle which applies to all levels of reality. Meillassoux's examples are, amongst others, Nietzsche's Will to Power, Leibniz' monads, Schopenhauer's will, perception in Bergson, Deleuze's 'life' or 'larval subjects', and reason or spirit in Hegel.¹⁶

¹⁴ AF 37.

¹⁵ IRR 1-2.

¹⁶ AF 37; IRR 3. The value of the term subjectalism, Meillassoux claims, is that it covers both idealism (Hegel) and vitalism (Nietzsche, Bergson,

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It is not exactly clear what Meillassoux's criticism on this point is. Sometimes, he appears to accuse Hegel of being a metaphysician, where Meillassoux defines metaphysics as any position which claims that there is an absolutely necessary entity.¹⁷ The criticism would be, then, that Hegel postulates a necessary entity, namely spirit, while for Meillassoux all things or entities are necessarily contingent. However, this criticism would be off the mark, since, whatever else we can say about Hegel, it is clear that for him the absolute (or spirit, or reason for that matter) is not an entity. It is rather precisely Hegel's goal to show, in the *Logic*, that every attempt to set up a limited or determined concept as an ultimate principle of truth necessarily fails. As for Meillassoux, for Hegel every *thing* is necessarily determined, limited and finite, and therefore contingent.¹⁸

Although Meillassoux is here not completely clear in his terminology, we should assume that his criticism of metaphysics in this sense (postulating a necessary entity) applies primarily to pre-Kantian dogmatic metaphysics.¹⁹ His criticism of Hegel then takes a slightly different tack.

Deleuze), whereas the latter normally presents itself as a criticism of the former (IRR 4-5;6).

17 AF 32.

18 Meillassoux's view that spirit is a metaphysical entity is arguably a result of the greater focus, in the French tradition, on the *Phenomenology of Spirit* over the *Science of Logic*. The *Logic* can be read as a series of failed attempts to determine the absolute in terms of traditional metaphysical concepts such as 'a' thing (unity, determination, limitation, finitude etc.) or oppositions such as essence/appearance, finitude/infinity. As Paul Franks shows, Hegel's concern here is rooted in the shared German idealist concern with the problem of the 'unconditioned' status of the absolute, which in turn is rooted in pre-Kantian rationalism. See Paul W. Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005). The thing with the unconditioned (das Unbedingte) is precisely that it is not a thing (*Ding*) (see Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781-1801* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002], 11.). I will return to the matter of Hegel's views on contingency further down.

19 Ibid.

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As Meillassoux notes, after Kant's critique of dogmatism it had become impossible to claim straight-forward knowledge of a necessary entity qua 'thing in itself'. Hegel's approach, therefore, was to claim that what is absolutely necessary is the way in which things appear to us - what Meillassoux calls the "the a priori forms of knowledge," and which he identifies elsewhere with the laws of nature and logic.²⁰ Whereas, for Kant, the necessity of these "correlational forms" could not be proven, and they could therefore only be described, Hegel thought that their necessity could be deduced.²¹ For Kant, the way reality appears to us is necessary only for us, and it is possible that the way reality is in itself is different from the way it appears. By contrast, for Hegel, on Meillassoux's account, if the necessity of the correlational forms can be proven, it doesn't make sense to suppose that there is an unknowable world 'in itself' lying behind appearances. This, then, is the sense in which Hegel 'absolutizes' the correlation. The way Meillassoux distinguishes here between Kant and Hegel is going to play an important role in the rest of this paper. As I will argue further down, the core of Meillassoux's own argument for the necessity of contingency actually depends on this shift from Kant to Hegel.

Meillassoux's second criticism of Hegel concerns the notion of contradiction. Meillassoux argues that, because contingency is absolutely necessary, contradiction is impossible: if a contradictory entity did exist, this entity would be necessary, since it could support all contradictory predicates, including that of being and non-being. However, since he believes to have shown, with his proof of the principle of factuality, that contingency and contingency alone is necessary, there can be no necessary entity; therefore, a contradictory entity is equally impossible.²² It is on this point that Meillassoux both learns from Hegel, and sees himself as going beyond him in a crucial way. As he writes in the interview with Harman:

²⁰ AF 38; 54.

²¹ AF 38.

²² AF 69.

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Hegel, along with Marx, was my only true master: the one on whom I had to depend in order to achieve my own thinking ... To my mind, believing in real necessity (metaphysics) and defending it with the greatest degree of rigor, obliges one to become a dialectician, and thus to be condemned to the stating of contradictions. Hegel understood this better than anyone. He unveiled the core of all metaphysics as a pure and simple contradiction, and demonstrated that if one wishes to continue to defend the former absolute necessity, it would be necessary to rehabilitate the notion of contradiction, which is the irrational notion par excellence. And here we find the true greatness of the dialectic: it exhibits the contradictory character of all real necessity. And conversely, it indicates the price that must be paid by the absolute refusal of all ontological contradiction: the related refusal of any necessity of things, laws, or events.²³

This is the context in which, in *After Finitude*, Meillassoux accuses Hegel of being a “thinker of absolute identity.”²⁴ It is precisely because he affirms contradiction that Hegel has to reduce all becoming and difference to identity, and all contingency to necessity.²⁵ Meillassoux reaffirms this point a few pages later: although Hegel admits a “moment of irremediable contingency” into his system, this moment is introduced only to show that nothing, not even contingency, escapes the necessity of the Hegelian absolute. Contingency,

23 Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, 168-169.

24 AF 70.

25 As Žižek notes, however, Hegel does not actually claim that contradictory entities can exist. It is precisely the impossibility of contradiction which causes finite things to be destroyed: “In another ambiguous (mis) reading of Hegel, Meillassoux claims that the dialectical principle of contradiction (contradictions are really present in things) excludes any change: change means a transformation of p into non-p, of a feature into its opposite, but since, in a contradiction, a thing already is its opposite, it has nowhere to develop into ... Here, however, Meillassoux misses the point of Hegelian dialectical movement: contradiction is necessary and at the same time impossible; that is, a finite thing precisely cannot be simultaneously A and non-A, which is why the process through which it is compelled to assume contradiction equals its annihilation” (*Less than Nothing*, 628).

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in Hegel, is “deduced from the unfolding of the absolute, which in itself, qua rational totality, is devoid of contingency. Thus, in Hegel, the necessity of contingency is not derived from contingency as such and contingency alone, but from a Whole that is ontologically superior to the latter.”²⁶

On Meillassoux’s reading, therefore, Hegel is not only a thinker of absolute identity, but also of rational totality, the Whole in which all differences are reconciled. This is the orthodox view of Hegel which has been propagated, in one way or another, by most of the luminaries of the continental tradition, including Heidegger, Derrida, Deleuze and Foucault. This view, however, is challenged by many contemporary Hegel scholars. Žižek’s and Gabriel’s interpretations, which we will discuss further on, are the most interesting for this discussion, because (unlike most scholars who publish in English) they engage directly with the ‘French’ version of the thesis that Hegel is a thinker of totality, which Meillassoux seems to adhere to.²⁷ Their disagreement with Meillassoux with regards to his interpretation of Hegel centre precisely on these two points: the status of necessity and contingency in Hegel, and the question of totality. As we will see, both Žižek and Gabriel argue that Hegel is not a thinker of totality, at least not in the sense generally ascribed to him, and that this is why Meillassoux’s critique of Hegel fails.

1.2 Hegel’s role in the argument for the principle of factuality

Aside from Meillassoux’s rather throwaway criticisms, Hegel plays a less obvious but much more interesting role in Meil-

26 AF 80.

27 Many of the prominent Anglo-American Hegel scholars also try to defend a Hegel who is not dogmatic or ‘metaphysical’ in the traditional sense, either through a ‘non-metaphysical’ interpretation (e.g. Pippin or Brandom) or a ‘revised metaphysical’ interpretation (e.g. Beiser, Stern or Houlgate). The background of their debate is quite different, however, and it does not really overlap with Meillassoux’s concerns. For a brief overview of this issue, see Frederick C. Beiser, *Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 53–57. I return to this issue in some more detail in footnote 62 below.

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lassoux's central argument in *After Finitude*: his proof of the principle of factuality, or the necessity of contingency. This argument, which offers a rational proof of Meillassoux's own position, is the core of his thesis, and it seems to me that it is also the most difficult and the least clearly argued part of the book. Because the rest of Meillassoux's theses - including the possible derivation of a mathematical absolute, the status of ancestral statements, the critique of correlationism, the derivation of the principles of non-contradiction and contingent existence, and the non-totalizability of the possible - depend on the success of this argument, Meillassoux's entire project stands or falls with it.

What does Meillassoux seek to demonstrate in this argument? Firstly, that everything which exists could really be otherwise, and secondly, that this principle constitutes the only absolute: "First, that contingency is necessary, and hence eternal; second, that contingency alone is necessary."²⁸ He tries to prove this through a rational argument where, firstly, he assumes that, as he puts it in *Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition*, "the space of the philosophically thinkable" is exhausted by a number of contrasting positions²⁹ and, secondly, he proceeds by eliminating each position one by one in order to show that his version of speculative materialism³⁰ is the only tenable one.

The most important step of the argument is the confrontation between correlationism and idealism. Before we deal with this argument directly, two questions of terminology arise which need to be clarified first. The first has to do with the distinction between various forms of idealism, and the historical philosophers who Meillassoux takes to have held

28 AF 65.

29 IRR 7, footnote 3.

30 Meillassoux also uses the term 'speculative materialism' to refer to other theories which claim that it is possible to think something which exists independently from thought, such as Epicureanism (AF 36). These varieties of naive materialism have been refuted by correlationism, however; so Meillassoux's speculative materialism is in fact a 'revised' speculative materialism.

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these positions. The second question is about the various expressions which Meillassoux uses to refer to the ‘correlational forms’, the necessity or contingency of which is at issue in the argument.

In *After Finitude*, the distinction Meillassoux draws between subjectivist metaphysics, subjective idealism and absolute idealism is not very clear. In *Iterations*, Reiteration, Repetition Meillassoux acknowledges this problem, and attempts to clarify his position by grouping together all three of these positions under the header ‘subjectalism’.³¹ As I will argue, however, the argument for the principle of factuality depends in an important sense on a distinction between subjective and absolute (or Hegelian) idealism.³²

In order to be as clear as possible, let me try to set out these distinctions in some detail. In the wake of Kant, it is traditional to distinguish between three forms of idealism: Kantian transcendental idealism, ‘subjective’ idealism and ‘objective’ or ‘absolute’ idealism. Subjective idealism (usually associated with Fichte) and absolute idealism (associated with Schelling and Hegel) are two alternative responses to what the German idealists saw as the central problem with Kant’s philosophy: his postulation of an unknowable thing-in-itself, and the danger of scepticism arising from the attendant two-world metaphysics. Put very crudely, subjective idealism would attempt to reduce the objectivity of the things-in-themselves to the positing activity of an absolute ‘I’ or ‘Ego’, while absolute idealism would seek to explain both the objective and subjective aspects of experience in terms of a unifying ‘ground’ or ‘absolute’.³³

31 IRR 2-3.

32 Meillassoux refers to Hegel’s idealism as “absolute idealism” (AF 38) as well as “speculative idealism” (AF 59).

33 Of course, these distinctions, and the extent to which individual philosophers can be allocated to one form of idealism or another, is the subject of extensive debate. See Beiser, *German Idealism*. Beiser includes both Kant and Fichte under subjective idealism, and Hölderlin, Novalis, Schlegel, Schelling and Hegel under absolute idealism. As Beiser shows, the difference between subjective and objective idealism is easily exaggerated

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In *After Finitude*, Meillassoux uses the term ‘subjective idealism’ in a much broader sense. Under this term (for which he also uses ‘subjectivist metaphysics’),³⁴ he seems to sweep together a great number of philosophical positions: Berkeley, those philosophers who “absolutize the correlation” (including Hegel and Schelling, as well as Leibniz, Bergson, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Deleuze), and the ‘subjective idealist’ in the argument for the principle of factuality, who corresponds more precisely to the subjective idealist in the sense mentioned above. As I mentioned, he clarifies his position in *Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition* by classing all of the above as subjectalists. However, this does not solve the problem altogether. Firstly, one might reasonably disagree with the way Meillassoux jumps over all distinctions, not only between different forms of idealism, but also between idealism and all other forms of ‘subjectalism’. More importantly for the present argument, however, Meillassoux himself does actually distinguish between subjective idealism and speculative or absolute idealism (i.e. Hegel), while at the same time appearing to conflate them. In the argument for the principle of factuality Meillassoux presents the position of the ‘subjective idealist’ as follows. The subjective idealist maintains that “I cannot think of myself as no longer existing without, through that very thought, contradicting myself. I can only think of myself as existing, and as existing the way I exist; thus, I cannot but exist, and always exist as I exist now.”³⁵ The subjective idealist maintains, therefore, that subjectivity – mind, ideas, thought, consciousness – is necessary, because denying its existence gives rise to a contradiction. At a stretch, this position might be attributed to Berkeley or Fichte, but it hardly seems appropriate to describe Schelling’s philosophy of nature or Hegel’s absolute idealism. As the argument proceeds, however,

(and is partly the result of Hegel’s own reading of his predecessors as ‘subjective’ idealists). For example, Fichte’s concern with the existence of an objective reality runs much deeper than the caricatured portrayal as a subjectivist by Hegel and others would suggest.

34 AF 38; 52.

35 AF 55.

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Meillassoux does seem to also include the “speculative idealist” in this position.³⁶ But elsewhere in *After Finitude* he ascribes quite a different position to the “absolute” or speculative idealist, who he there identifies explicitly with Hegel. From this alternative point of view absolute idealism consists not in claiming the irreducibility of thought, but in absolutizing the correlation. As I mentioned above, in Hegel’s case, this absolutization consists in claiming that the “correlational forms”, the “structural invariants” in our experience of the world are absolutely necessary, as opposed to Kant’s claim that they are merely necessary for us.³⁷ As I will argue, the difference between these two variants of idealism, although implicit and not clearly marked by Meillassoux himself, is important to his argument for the principle of factuality and greatly influences the conclusions we can draw from it.³⁸

To understand this point we have to return to Meillassoux’s distinction between Hegel and Kant, in order to explain what

36 Meillassoux sneaks in the speculative idealist almost unnoticed: the correlationist has to think the contingency of reality as a real possibility, because otherwise “it would never have occurred to you not to be subjective (or speculative) idealist” (AF 59).

37 AF 38.

38 Adrian Johnston argues that Meillassoux’s conflation of various forms of idealism is part of his strategy. Johnston points out that Meillassoux does not give conclusive arguments against idealism: he seems to hold that a Berkeleyan position of extreme solipsism is rationally irrefutable. Instead, he tries to show that correlationists, who maintain that the world in itself is unknowable, are forced to choose between realism and absolute idealism: Meillassoux “tries to force non-absolutist correlationists (such as Kantian transcendental idealists and various stripes of phenomenologists) to choose between realism (such as that of anti-correlational speculative materialism) and absolute idealism (which, as Meillassoux’s reference to Berkeley reveals, is presumed without argument to be *prima facie* untenable in its ridiculous absurdity)” (‘Hume’s Revenge: A Dieu, Meillassoux?’, 98). This interpretation seems accurate, especially from the vantage point of Meillassoux’s clarification in ‘Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition’. But the ambiguity about the status of the idealist remains. What is the “absolute idealism” to which Johnston refers above? Is it the (Berkeleyan) philosopher of absolute subjectivity, or the (Hegelian) absolute idealist?

he means by ‘correlational forms’. The question of the status of these correlational forms runs throughout the argument for the principle of factuality. It is important to point out the connection between a number of different terms which Meillassoux uses, at different points in *After Finitude*, to refer to the same thing. What he calls, in relation to Kant and Hegel, the “a priori forms of knowledge” or “correlational forms”³⁹ he refers to later as “invariants” or “structural invariants” which “govern the world.”⁴⁰ These structural invariants are, moreover, identified with the laws of nature and logic, “physical and logical laws.”⁴¹ The difference between Kant and Hegel (or, in the argument for the principle of factuality, between the correlationist and the idealist) is that Kant argued that, while our experience of the world is governed by such structural invariants (his categories and the forms of time and space), and these invariant forms of our experience are indeed necessary ‘for us’, we cannot conclude from this that they are absolutely necessary, because it is possible that the way things are in themselves is actually very different from the way they are given to us. On Meillassoux’s view, Hegel, as we have seen, maintained that these structural invariants (for Hegel, these would be the concepts of the *Science of Logic*) can in fact be proven to be necessary and are therefore themselves absolute, and not merely the way our experience happens to be constituted. The point I want to make is that because the aim of Meillassoux’s argument for the principle of factuality

39 AF 38.

40 AF 39; 53-54. Comparing these two passages shows that Meillassoux identifies the correlational forms, structural invariants and laws of nature and logic: “Facticity ... pertains to those structural invariants that supposedly govern the world - invariants which may differ from one form of correlationism to another, but whose function in every case is to provide the minimal organization of representation: principle of causality, forms of perception, logical laws, etc.” (39). “By turning facticity into a property of things themselves - a property which I am alleged to know - I turn facticity from something that applies only to what is in the world into a form of contingency capable of being applied to the invariants that govern the world (i.e. its physical and logical laws)” (54).

41 AF 54.

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is to show that the laws of nature and logic are contingent, and he identifies these laws with the Kantian or Hegelian correlational forms, the ultimate referent of the ‘idealist’ in this argument is the Hegelian absolute idealist and not the subjective idealist.⁴² The issue at stake in the argument is the necessity or contingency of the laws of nature and logic, the structural invariants of experience, and not just the existence of something independent of thought. Meillassoux has presented Hegel as the thinker who maintains that these structural invariants are necessary; therefore, it would seem to be Hegel who is the main foil in Meillassoux’s argument against correlationism. Although this is not how Meillassoux himself presents his argument, my point is that Hegel’s role in the argument is greater than Meillassoux lets on.

Let us look at Meillassoux’s argument in some more detail to make this point clear. The argument takes the following course. According to Meillassoux the correlationist (e.g. Kant) wants to argue that it is possible, but not necessary that the world in itself is completely different from the way it is given to us. According to correlationism, we simply cannot know whether there is a metaphysical absolute beyond what we experience, or whether the way we experience things is eternally necessary. On correlationist terms, it is therefore perfectly possible that the idealist (on my reading, Hegel) happens to be right that the structural invariants of experience are necessary, but it is illegitimate for the idealist to claim that we can know this absolutely.

Accordingly, as Meillassoux claims, for the correlationists we are dealing with “possibilities of ignorance”: various forms of metaphysical dogmatism (the claim that there is a substantial absolute of this or that kind), idealism (the claim

42 Brassier makes the same point implicitly. His reading of Meillassoux’s argument for the principle of factuality also takes the difference between Kant and Hegel on the necessity of the correlational forms as a starting point, and argues that the main opposition in Meillassoux’s argument is between strong correlationism and the Hegelian absolutization of these correlational forms, or the “cognitive structures governing the phenomenal realm” (*Nihil Unbound*, 65).

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that the forms of our experience are absolutely necessary) and even speculative materialism (the claim that it is really possible for these forms to change without reason) are all possible, in the sense that we do not know which of these (mutually exclusive) options is really the case. All we can know is what is in fact given to us in experience. Meillassoux, on the other hand, wants to claim that we can really know that it is actually possible for everything to change without reason; that “the in-itself could actually be anything whatsoever and that we know this.”⁴³ How does Meillassoux move from the epistemological claim of correlationism to his own ontological claim? As he puts it himself: “How then are we able to claim that this capacity-to-be-other is an absolute - an index of knowledge rather than of ignorance?”⁴⁴

How does he accomplish this move from ignorance to knowledge? This is the crux of the argument for the principle of factuality in *After Finitude*, where he tries to fix the correlationist on the horns of a dilemma.⁴⁵ Either a) the correlationist admits that the “structural invariants” of our experience - the laws of nature and logic - could really be otherwise, instead of his original claim that we simply cannot know whether or not they are different in themselves from how they appear to us, or b) he has to admit to idealism, because if these laws could not really be otherwise, that means they are absolutely necessary - the position, we have seen, which Meillassoux ascribes to Hegel.

Meillassoux repeats the argument in slightly different forms. The difference between these versions to me does not seem trivial, and it rests precisely on the status of the idealist, which, as I noted, changes over the course of the argument, something about which Meillassoux is not very clear. The ‘subjective idealist’ in the first argument - the conversation between dogmatist, atheist, agnostic, subjective idealist and speculative materialist - maintains that it is impossible for

43 AF 65.

44 AF 56.

45 AF 54-59.

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me to think my own death, and that therefore thought itself is absolute, since it cannot think its own absence.⁴⁶ As I mentioned above, this seems to correspond more closely to the subjective idealist in the traditional sense (Berkeley or Fichte, as opposed to absolute idealists such as Hegel). Meillassoux then argues that the (correlationist) agnostic cannot refute the subjective idealist without maintaining that it is possible to think something which exists independently from thought - i.e., something non-correlational. Because the subjective idealist holds that it is impossible to think my own death, the correlationist has to argue precisely that I can think my own death, not just as a correlate of my thought (because this would lead back to subjective idealism) but as a real possibility. In the second, more general version of this argument, Meillassoux makes it clear that the argument not only forces the correlationist to concede that something can exist independently from thought, but also that the structural invariants of our experience, the laws of nature and logic,⁴⁷ could be different from the way they are and could change for no reason whatsoever. Here, as indicated by the stress on the facticity of the correlational forms or structural invariants, Meillassoux does seem to be referring to Hegel: this argument depends on the distinction between Hegel and Kant made earlier, and the idealist here stands in for both the “subjective” and the “speculative” idealist.⁴⁸

Meillassoux’s argument could be summarized in the following way. Note that Meillassoux is not just concerned to show, against the subjective idealist, that there is a reality

46 AF 55-57.

47 With regard to the laws of logic, it must be remarked that Meillassoux claims that at least one fundamental law of logic - the principle of non-contradiction - is necessary, and that this necessity can be derived from the principle of factuality (see below; AF 80; Quentin Meillassoux, ‘Potentiality and Virtuality’, in *The Speculative Turn*, 232). Given his identification of the ‘laws of nature and logic’ with the ‘structural invariants of experience’, it seems likely that the laws of logic which, on his view, are contingent, are more determined sets of ‘laws’ such as Kant’s categories and Hegel’s concepts.

48 AF 59.

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independent of thought. The main thrust of his argument is to prove that the laws of nature and logic, the way in which things necessarily appear to us, could themselves be subject to change. I think the argument can be reduced to a simple logical disjunction, which takes two different forms:

1a. Either it is really possible for the structural invariants of our experience (the ‘for-us’) to be different from the way things are in themselves (the ‘in-itself’), or it is not.

1b. If it is not really possible, this means that some form of idealism holds, because then the structural invariants of our experience are absolute.

1c. If we refuse to accept idealism, therefore, it is really possible for the in-itself to be different from the for-us. But if this possibility to be otherwise is a real possibility, the correlationist can no longer claim that we simply do not know whether the “structural invariants” of our experience, the laws of nature and logic are necessary or not: we know that they are not necessary, because they could really be different from the way they are, presently, for us.

In order to escape idealism, Meillassoux argues, the correlationist has to continue to distinguish between the ‘for-us’ and the ‘in-itself’. The idealist’s claim is that there is no difference between the way things appear to us and the way they really are, because we know that the way things necessarily appear to us, the structural invariants of our experience, are in fact absolutely necessary. But Meillassoux’s speculative solution also leads to the collapse of the distinction between in-itself and for-us. What the correlationist took to be a difference between the world as it is in itself (which is unknowable) and the world as it appears to us (which is necessary, but only for us) is in fact a difference between the world as it appears to us and another really possible way in which the world might appear to us. There is, therefore, no unknowable in-itself, just as there is no deeper reason underlying appearance: all there is are contingent things, contingent laws and contingent thoughts. “There is nothing beneath or beyond the manifest

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gratuitousness of the given - nothing but the limitless and lawless power of its destruction, emergence or persistence.”⁴⁹

Meillassoux’s argument could therefore be rephrased as follows:

2a. Either it is really possible for the structural invariants of our experience to be other than they are, or it is not.

2b. If it is not really possible, we have to affirm idealism, because then these invariants would be absolute.

2c. Therefore, if we reject idealism, the structural invariants of our experience - the laws of logic and nature - can really be otherwise.

We can now see how Meillassoux proves the necessary contingency of all things. He eliminates, step by step, the possible candidates for what might exist necessarily. The contingency of everyday things, such as vases and books, is readily apparent: they might not exist, and when they exist they can be destroyed. The only other candidates for absolute existence are the correlation (either in the form of a simple hypostatization of thought or mind, or in the form of some transsubjective principle such as life, will or spirit), and the structural invariants of our experience, i.e. the laws of nature and logic. Since he has demonstrated the non-necessity of thought’s existence in the argument about death, and the non-necessity of the laws of nature and logic in the argument sketched above, there can be no necessary entity, and the contingency of all things must be the only thing which is absolutely necessary.⁵⁰

Now, let me add some questions about the different steps in this argument. Firstly, Meillassoux uses the term ‘absolute’ in two different ways. In the argument about death, absolute

49 AF 63.

50 In IRR, Meillassoux distinguishes between these levels as follows. Everyday things are contingent: we know that they can change. The laws of nature are a fact: we can conceive of them changing, but we do not know if it is possible. The correlation is an arche-fact: we cannot prove its necessity, but we cannot conceive of its being different either (IRR 9).

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means ‘existing independently of thought’. In the following steps, it means ‘absolutely necessary’. In the first step of his argument, he argues for the existence of an absolute (something not correlated to thought) by showing that correlationism, in order to escape idealism, needs to maintain that it can think its own non-existence. In the second step, however, he uses ‘absolute’ to mean the absolute necessity (not just for thought, but in itself) of everything’s capacity-to-be-other; an absolute necessity at which he arrives through the logical elimination of alternate possibilities. It is not clear to me that this move from one sense of absolute to the other is unproblematic.⁵¹

Secondly, the entire argument depends on the rejection of idealism. But, as I said, Meillassoux is not at all clear about the role idealism plays in the argument, and precisely what he means by idealism - in particular, he hesitates and shifts between the use of the ‘subjective idealist’ and the ‘absolute idealist’ in his argument. Adrian Johnston argues that Meillassoux does not in fact provide any reasons against absolute idealism, but holds - as the argument above demonstrates - that we must choose between idealism and speculative materialism, where he thinks that the former is obviously absurd.⁵² In fact, Meillassoux does take his line of argumentation to have already excluded (at least some form of) idealism,⁵³ so that a return to Berkeley, like a return to weak correlationism, has become impossible. But, as Johnston correctly notes, he does not give conclusive arguments for choosing one horn of the sketched dilemma over the other. The rejection of Berkeleyan subjective solipsism may be the result of the fact that Meillassoux thinks correlationism successfully undermines this position, or simply, as Johnston suggests, of philosophical taste.⁵⁴ But it is not at all certain that the rejection of subjective

51 On this question, see Bart Zantvoort, ‘The Absolute’, in *The Meillassoux Dictionary*, ed. Peter Gratton and Paul J. Ennis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

52 Johnston, ‘Hume’s Revenge: À Dieu, Meillassoux?’, 98. See footnote 37 above.

53 AF 60.

54 ‘Hume’s Revenge: À Dieu, Meillassoux?’, 99.

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idealism in the argument about death implies that all forms of ‘idealism’, in the very broad sense of holding that some of the ‘structural invariants of our experience’ are necessary, has thereby become impossible.

Part 2: Hegel as a speculative materialist

Let me now turn to the similarities between Meillassoux and Hegel. It is clear that Hegel is, even on Meillassoux’s terms, a speculative philosopher, since he claims that thought can think the absolute. But on what grounds could we claim that Hegel is also a materialist philosopher? Doesn’t that seem to fly in the face of all evidence? As we will see further down, Žižek argues that Hegel is a materialist thinker precisely because he does not maintain that the world is a closed totality, and because he does not adhere to the principle of sufficient reason; Žižek’s Hegel is, in short, exactly the opposite of Meillassoux’s Hegel. It is true that Hegel and Meillassoux are much closer than Meillassoux would seem to allow on a number of key points. Firstly, Meillassoux’s speculative abolition of the distinction between the ‘for-us’ and the ‘in-itself’, which I touched upon above, actually echoes Hegel quite closely. Secondly, Hegel, like Meillassoux, also criticizes the principle of sufficient reason, even though he is one of the main targets of Meillassoux’s critique on this point.

2.1 *The abolition of the in itself*

We have seen how Meillassoux’s critique of correlationism ended up cancelling the Kantian distinction between the world as it appears to us and the notion of an unknowable world in itself: for Meillassoux, there is nothing beyond the facticity of the given. But did Hegel not argue precisely this: that there is no mysterious ‘essential’ world lying behind the given, but that what appears to us is the world in itself? This is the upshot of the theatrical gesture recounted by Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: when we sweep away the curtain

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in the inner sanctum of the temple, we see that there is in fact nothing behind it.⁵⁵ And we could read the following passage from the *Science of Logic* as a mocking criticism of what Meillassoux calls the correlationist ‘codicil’ (AF 13), the tendency to add to every statement about the world the remark that ‘sure, but that’s only the way it appears for us’: “To say that admittedly, we have no proper knowledge of things-in-themselves but we do have proper knowledge of them within the sphere of appearances ... is like attributing to someone a correct perception, with the rider that nevertheless he is incapable of perceiving what is true but only what is false.”⁵⁶

Both Meillassoux and Hegel argue that thought is capable of thinking the absolute because there is no unbridgeable gap, in principle, between the way the world appears to us and the way it is in itself.⁵⁷ In maintaining this position, both of

55 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. J. N. Findlay, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 103.

56 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Humanity Books, 1969), 46 (henceforth quoted as SL). That this constitutes a criticism specifically of Kant can be seen, for example, from the following passage: “Even the Kantian objectivity of thinking itself is in turn only subjective insofar as thoughts, despite being universal and necessary determinations, are, according to Kant, merely our thoughts and distinguished from what the thing is in itself by an insurmountable gulf. By contrast, the true objectivity of thinking consists in this: that thoughts are not merely our thoughts but at the same time the in itself of things and of the object-world [des Gegenständlichen] in general ... [Objectivity] has the meaning last mentioned above, of what is thought to be in itself, what is there, in contrast to what is merely thought by us and therefore still different from the matter itself or in itself.” G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part I: Science of Logic*, trans. Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), §412s.

57 It could be argued, however, that even if both Hegel and Meillassoux collapse the two worlds of essence and appearance into one the distinction

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them seek to overcome scepticism with regards to the possibility of knowledge, as well as Kantian transcendentalism. We have seen Meillassoux's argument; how does Hegel arrive at his conclusion?

The amount of commentary on this issue is overwhelming, and I do not claim to be able to offer a comprehensive account here.⁵⁸ In rough outline, however, I think the issue can be stated fairly simply. There are two steps to Hegel's defence of the possibility of absolute knowledge: Firstly, his critique of scepticism, and second, his development of a self-reflective philosophical method in the *Logic*.

Hegel's critique of scepticism, which can be found in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, has two elements.⁵⁹ Firstly, he thinks that he can show how scepticism arises, both as a philosophical position and as a stage in the development of individual

returns within this one world. In Hegel, this underlies the question about the relation between *Logic* and *Realphilosophie*, between the necessity of the (onto)logical structures described in the *Science of Logic* and the contingency of natural and historical events. Meillassoux, according to Hallward ('Anything is Possible', 140) and Johnston ('Hume's Revenge', 102; 110) makes a problematic distinction between the physical-applied-empirical-ontic level and the metaphysical-pure-logical-ontological level (Johnston argues, for example, that Meillassoux borrows selective evidence from empirical science, such as the results of carbon dating, while at the same time seeming to undermine the status of such evidence through his rationalist argument for hyper-chaos).

58 On this topic, see Sally Sedgwick, *Hegel's Critique of Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

59 The importance of the question of scepticism for Hegel has been widely noted. See, for example, Pippin, *German Idealism*; Michael N. Forster, *Hegel and Skepticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Paul W. Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 146–200; Markus Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology: Essays in German Idealism* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 3–34.

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consciousness, from a more original position of immediate knowledge about the world. We become sceptical because the knowledge we gain through immediate experience, which at first seems to be the only possible source of certainty, turns out to be profoundly unreliable. The separation between thought and reality is, on Hegel's view, a necessary illusion, born of the frustrations we experience in exercising our limited capacity for knowledge and action. Secondly, Hegel argues that scepticism is itself internally inconsistent. The sceptical position leads to a performative contradiction: "Its acts and its words always contradict each other." This is the standard criticism against the sceptic: you say you don't know anything, but this is a claim to knowledge; you say hearing, seeing etc. are illusory, yet you can only claim this because you see and hear.⁶⁰ Furthermore, scepticism leads to a contradiction with regard to the position of consciousness. On the one hand, Hegel argues, the point of scepticism is to prove that consciousness is independent from external reality, that the determinations which it finds through sense-perception have no truth for it. On the other hand, however, accepting scepticism leaves consciousness with no criterion of truth, and therefore forces it to slavishly accept whatever situation it finds itself in and whatever experience it is presented with, as long as it can state to itself that this experience has no ultimate truth for it.⁶¹

On the basis of these arguments it seems reasonable to think that the separation between the subject and the object of knowledge, which the sceptic assumed, cannot consistently be maintained. Throughout the *Phenomenology*, therefore, Hegel argues that thought and being are at least in principle reconciled, that it is possible for subjective knowledge to have a true content, and that the task of philosophy is to work out what this content is.

The *Science of Logic* continues this line of argument in a

60 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 124-125.

61 Ibid. See also Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology*, 31-32.

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number of ways. In the second book, on 'essence', Hegel starts off with the idea that appearance and essence are distinct, that "behind this being there is something else than being itself, and that this background constitutes the truth of being."⁶² He then proceeds to thoroughly dismantle this notion, by showing that all the classical dualisms in the history of philosophy - matter and form, essence and appearance, substance and accident, activity and passivity - mutually presuppose one another, and are ultimately impossible to maintain. Starting out from the premise, developed in the *Phenomenology*, that thought is not opposed to the world but is a part of it, the *Logic* tries to work out what being must be in order for thought to arise in it. As Gabriel rightly points out, although it is true that Hegel focuses on the nexus of thought and being, this does not mean, as Meillassoux would seem to think, that he claims there are no objects before there are subjects.⁶³ Rather, the idea is that we can deduce something about the structure of being by reflecting on the self-reflective process of thought. Subjectivity does not make objects possible, but it shows what being (including objects) must always already have been (even before the existence of subjects) in order for subjects to be possible. To clarify this with an example, think of diffraction imaging techniques which are currently being used to create images of sub-microscopic objects such as nanocrystals or proteins. Shooting radiation at such an object creates a diffraction pattern, from which the structure of the object can be mathematically reconstructed. Clearly, the object exists before its 'reflection' in the diffraction pattern, but this reflection nonetheless creates new information which allows us to meaningfully describe the original object.

On the basis of these considerations, it is possible to read Hegel's philosophy as an experimental, speculative, even fallibilist attempt to determine the "structural invariants" of thought and being, without claiming to fix them once and

⁶² SL 389.

⁶³ Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology*, xx.

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for all. Hegel believes, as he tries to show in the *Logic*, that philosophy can achieve self-transparency of method, which allows it to speculate and describe being through reason while at the same time retroactively justifying and securing its own procedure. This is made possible by the self-reflective, meta-theoretical structure of the *Logic*, which functions as a description of the fundamental categories which determine thought as well as things (such as being, negation, limitation, difference, etc.) while at the same time also constructing, justifying and critically delimiting these very concepts.⁶⁴

64 The question whether Hegel's *Logic* describes only the structures of thought or the structures of thought as well as the structures of being or things is the fundamental point of disagreement between so-called 'non-metaphysical' and 'metaphysical' readings of Hegel. Non-metaphysical interpretations, like Pippin's, claim that Hegel is basically working within a Kantian transcendentalist framework, and that the *Logic* does not describe the properties of things themselves but only the categories under which they could be given as objects of thought (Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* [Cambridge University Press, 1989]). Ontological or metaphysical interpretations, like Houlgate's, claim "that the categories set out in his logic are both the necessary concepts of thought and the intrinsic determinations of beings themselves" (Stephen Houlgate, 'Hegel's Logic', in *Hegel and Nineteenth-Century Philosophy* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008], 118-119). It must be noted that neither the non-metaphysical nor the metaphysical camp would agree with Meillassoux's interpretation of Hegel as a thinker of absolute necessity. Other non-metaphysical interpretations include: Klaus Hartmann, 'Hegel: a Non-Metaphysical View', in *Hegel: a Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. A. MacIntyre (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1972); Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Robert Brandom, 'Sketch of a Program for a Critical Reading of Hegel. Comparing Empirical and Logical Concepts', *Internationales Jahrbuch Des Deutschen Idealismus* 3 (2005): 131-61. While their various approaches and reconstructions of Hegel differ greatly, these authors try to 'salvage' Hegel for contemporary philosophy by underplaying what they take to be Hegel's indefensible metaphysical claims and by restricting the

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So to what extent is Meillassoux's claim that Hegel 'deduces' the absolute necessity of the correlational forms accurate? Although it is true that the concepts of Hegel's *Logic* are necessary in a certain sense, the question what this sense precisely entails remains an issue of great dispute. I will return to this question further down. Moreover, we could also ask the same question about Meillassoux. As I have argued elsewhere,⁶⁵ Meillassoux does not strictly stick to the claim that the only thing which is necessary is contingency. In *After Finitude*, he tries to derive other necessary propositions from the principle of factiality, his so-called "figures."⁶⁶ These figures are, firstly, the fact that a contradictory entity is impossible, and secondly, the fact that (at least one) contingent entity necessarily exists. But the project he outlines in *After Finitude* goes much further than that. Meillassoux aims, firstly, to prove the absolute reach of mathematics: its capacity to describe entities which

scope of his philosophy to a transcendental-epistemological (Pippin) or social-epistemological (Pinkard, Brandom) account. Other interpreters have questioned this approach, arguing that a non-deflationary or metaphysical reading of Hegel does not entail a return to pre-Kantian dogmatic metaphysics. See, for example, Beiser, *Hegel*; Robert Stern, *Hegelian Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Kenneth R. Westphal, *Hegel's Epistemology: A Philosophical Introduction to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003); James Kreines, 'Hegel: Metaphysics without Pre-Critical Monism', in *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* 57/58 (2008): 48-70. It should be clear from my reading of Hegel here that my interpretation is also ontological, although to situate it exactly within the terms of the current debate would have to be a subject for another paper.

65 Bart Zantvoort, entries on 'The Absolute' and 'Hegel' in *The Meillassoux Dictionary*, ed. Peter Gratton and Paul J. Ennis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

66 AF 80.

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exist independent from us.⁶⁷ Secondly, he aims to demonstrate the “absolute and ... unconditionally necessary scope” of the Cantorian transfinite.⁶⁸ Doing so would enable him, finally, to provide a speculative proof for the “legitimacy of the assumption that the stability of natural laws, which is the condition for every science of nature, can be absolutized.”⁶⁹ Contrary to what is sometimes thought, therefore, Meillassoux does not try to prove that the laws of nature could change at any moment. Instead, he wants to show that the stability of the laws of nature itself follows from his principle of the necessity of contingency: “Thus, it is a question of establishing that the laws of nature derive their factual stability from a property of temporality that is itself absolute.”⁷⁰ But if this stability can be derived, does this not mean that it is necessary? What is the difference, then, between the Hegelian ‘deduction’ and Meillassoux’s ‘derivation’?

2.2 The principle of sufficient reason: Groundless ground and retroactive causation

According to Meillassoux, Hegel ‘absolutized’ the principle of sufficient reason. He argues that because according to this principle everything which exists is fully determined by a reason underlying it or existing prior to it, the absolutization of this principle “marked the culmination of the belief in the necessity of what is.”⁷¹ To put this more simply, Meillassoux claims that for Hegel everything is necessary because everything exists for a reason. This criticism of Hegel, which

⁶⁷ AF 117.

⁶⁸ AF 127.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ AF 71.

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is again very traditional, has usually served to tie Hegel's supposed affirmation of necessity to his supposedly reactionary and conservative politics.⁷²

Hegel's own treatment of the principle of sufficient reason in the *Logic* is, however, very complex and highly subtle. It is, furthermore, the primary foundation for the argument, made by Žižek and to some extent by Gabriel, that Hegel is not a thinker of necessity at all, but leaves room for a far greater deal of contingency than is generally acknowledged. This argument, to which I will return in more detail below, is that, on Hegel's account, necessity is not a case of a linear progression from one given state of affairs (the cause) to another which necessarily follows from it (the effect). Rather, he claims that causes (or, more specifically for Hegel, 'conditions') only become necessary causes retroactively, after something has happened. The fact that something happens, however, depends on an irreducible moment of contingent becoming.

This point may seem distinctly un-Hegelian (as Gabriel notes, it has its origin in Schelling's notion of "belated necessity" [*nachträgliche Notwendigkeit*]).⁷³ In the section of the *Logic* on 'ground' (*Grund*), however, Hegel does argue in detail for the thesis that the 'coming of a thing into existence' involves a moment of irreducible contingency or "groundless absolute becoming."⁷⁴

The German word *Grund* can be translated into English as 'reason' as well as 'ground'. This double meaning expresses the fact that we can understand 'reason' in two ways: either as a principle of explanation, an account of why something

72 This is, for example, Adorno's claim in *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1981). While it is clear that the late Hegel was no revolutionary, claims that he was a conservative or even 'totalitarian' thinker are not supported by evidence. See, for example, Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

73 Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology*, 121.

74 SL 476.

is the way it is, which is only an explanation ‘for us’; or as a principle of foundation, in which case the reason is the ‘ground’ or ‘support’ which really causes the thing to be the way it is. Because they both collapse the distinction between in-itself and for-us, both Meillassoux and Hegel think there is a necessary connection between these two meanings: the account we give about why something exists really says something about why it exists. This is why Meillassoux thinks abolishing the principle of sufficient reason really entails the contingency of all things, and why he takes Hegel to hold the opposite position.

Hegel starts his discussion with the idea that “everything has its sufficient reason [*Alles hat seinen zureichenden Grund*].”⁷⁵ However, he notes immediately that this principle is problematic, because it actually consists of two contradictory perspectives. These two aspects he calls ‘formal ground’ and ‘real ground’.

‘Formal ground’ expresses the idea which Meillassoux takes to be Hegel’s concept of sufficient reason: that everything has its ground in something else, and that everything is fully determined, and therefore made necessary, by its ground. According to this point of view, “There is nothing in the ground which is not in the grounded, just as there is nothing in the grounded which is not in the ground. When we ask for a ground, we want to see the same determination, which forms the content [of the thing], double, one time in the form of something posited, and the other time in that of a determinate being which is reflected into itself, of essentiality.”⁷⁶

The problem with this mode of explanation, however, as Hegel points out, is that it is essentially tautological. It just says the same thing twice, once in the form of a reason, and

75 SL 446.

76 SL 457. My translation. Miller has “...When we ask for a ground, we want to see the same determination that is content, double, once in the form of something posited, and again in the form of a determinate being reflected into itself, of essentiality.”

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once in the form of a result. This, Hegel argues, is the way science explains things when we don't actually know the reason for a phenomenon. When we say 'gravity' as an answer to the question why heavy bodies are attracted to one another, this doesn't really explain anything, since the answer to the question what gravity is would be (in Hegel's time, in any case): the attractive force which causes heavy bodies to be attracted to one another. As Hegel says, in everyday life we would hardly be satisfied with such an explanation: "To answer the question, why is this person going to town, with the reason, the ground, that it is because there is an attractive force in the town which urges him in that direction, is to give the kind of reply that is sanctioned in the sciences but outside them is counted absurd."⁷⁷

The problem is, really, one that is analogous to Kant's distinction between synthetic and analytic knowledge. On the one hand, if it is to be a sufficient reason, the ground should be identical with what it grounds: the content of the determined thing should fully be explained by the ground, and there should be nothing in the thing which is not determined by the ground. But, on the other hand, if ground and grounded are really identical, the ground is not really a reason because it does not explain anything, and the concept of ground would not have any sense, because if there is no difference between ground and grounded there would be nothing to explain in the first place.

What we really seem to mean by 'ground', Hegel argues therefore, is a 'synthetic' principle of explanation: something which is not identical with the thing it grounds, but which nonetheless has a necessary connection with it. This is what he calls 'real ground': "When we ask for a ground, we really demand that the content of the ground be a different determination from that of the phenomenon whose ground we are seeking."⁷⁸

77 SL 458-459.

78 SL 462.

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This mode of explaining or ‘grounding’, Hegel argues, presupposes that there are two things or states of affairs which are connected with regards to one particular aspect, but are otherwise independent and determined in a variety of ways. He explains this as follows: when someone is a civil servant, for example, the ‘reason’ for this may lie in his or her particular talents (or education, or political connections, etc.). But the individual has many other determinations besides being a civil servant, and being a civil servant involves many other things besides whatever caused this particular individual to become one.⁷⁹ In this way, ‘real ground’ seems to connect two things in a more meaningful way than ‘formal ground’, because it can give rise to causal chains in which one thing is explained in terms of another thing which at the same time is really different from it.

This leads to another problem, however. Things always stand in a multiplicity of relations to other things, and which of the relations, or which of the aspects of a relation is to be taken to be the ground or reason for something depends on what Hegel calls “external reflection,” the arbitrary point of view of an observer.⁸⁰ For any particular thing, many reasons can be given, and nothing in the thing itself indicates which is the essential one. What is the reason, for example, Hegel asks, for punishment? Retribution, deterrence, rehabilitation or the protection of society are all valid answers, but none of these fully explains what punishment is. In real ground, the tautological necessity of formal ground is replaced with a meaningful but contingent connection. Because the necessity of a ‘real’ reason is not self-evident, but calls for a further explanation, the concept of real ground leads either to an arbitrary choice of one reason among many, or to a regress of reasons: “An endless going about, which arrives at no final determination; for any and every thing one or more good grounds can be given, and also for its opposite; and a host of

79 SL 461-466.

80 SL 465.

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grounds can exist without anything following from them.”⁸¹

The question is, therefore, how to reconcile the contentless necessity of formal ground with the productive contingency of real ground. One way of doing this, Hegel argues, is by distinguishing between the ‘real’ or material conditions (*Bedingungen*) which determine something and make it possible, and the formal reason which, when the conditions are present, actually occasions the event to happen or the thing to “enter into existence”.⁸²

It is easiest to illustrate this point with an example. In order for a house to be built, certain conditions need to be fulfilled: the appropriate materials need to be available, the weather needs to be good, the foundation solid, the workers skilled and present. However, all these things do not actually amount to a sufficient reason: as Hegel says, the conditions are indifferent to whether a thing actually results or not.⁸³ Even if all the conditions are fulfilled, the building of the house does not necessarily follow: it is still possible for the workers to decide, at the last moment, to use the building materials and the fine weather to create a large bonfire. The conditions only become the conditions for building a house when the house is actually built. They are necessary, in the sense that they are part of the explanation of the building process, and the house could not be built without them, but they become necessary only retroactively, after the fact.

The movement from conditions to the existing thing - in this case, the decision to begin building - does not add another substantial, ‘final’ reason to the already existing conditions. It is impossible, Hegel argues, to conclude that something is made necessary by its conditions, because conditions are always conditioned by further conditions in an infinite

81 SL 466. Miller has ‘pursuit’ instead of ‘going about’ for ‘*Herumtreiben*’.

82 SL 474. Miller translates Hegel’s *Hervorgang der Sache in die Existenz* as “emergence of the fact into existence.”

83 SL 470.

chain.⁸⁴ The coming into existence of a thing, the shift from something being possible to something actually happening, is therefore not an instance of necessity, but a “groundless absolute becoming.”⁸⁵ The reality of conditions or causes does not constitute a finished totality, but is itself constantly rearranged by contingent events: only after something happens, because something happened, the infinite series of conditions or possible reasons is gathered together and circumscribed into a determinate constellation of causes.

It should be clear that this line of argument is one of the primary reasons which allows Žižek to claim that Hegel is a thinker of non-totally or, as Žižek puts it in Lacanian terms, ‘non-all’: “The key philosophical implication of Hegelian retroactivity is that it undermines the reign of the Principle of Sufficient Reason: this principle only holds in the condition of linear causality where the sum of past causes determines a future event - retroactivity means that the set of (past, given) reasons is never complete and ‘sufficient,’ since the past reasons are retroactively activated by what is, within the linear order, their effect.”⁸⁶ Further evidence for this thesis is provided by Hegel’s discussion of the role of the monarch in the *Philosophy of Right*, which Žižek discusses in *Less than Nothing*.⁸⁷ If it were not for the monarch, Hegel argues, the government would never be able to come to a decision, precisely because in any given situation an infinite number of causes and considerations, possible decisions and possible outcomes are at stake. If they are supposed to make a decision

84 SL 474.

85 SL 476-477. My translation. Miller has: “...Ground emerges merely as an illusory being that immediately vanishes; accordingly, this emergence is the tautological movement of the fact to itself, and its mediation by conditions and ground is the vanishing of both.”

86 Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, 213.

87 Ibid. 421-430.

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purely on the basis of rational knowledge of the situation, the ministers will “waver endlessly” between “reasons for and against,” and be effectively paralyzed.⁸⁸ The monarch provides the ‘irrational’ moment of purely contingent decision which interrupts the deliberation of the government and allows them to proceed to action, without thereby exercising any real power.⁸⁹ The existence and the will of the monarch are “groundless”,⁹⁰ in the sense developed in the *Logic*: the decision of the monarch is an empty, contentless, contingent and formal gesture, but if it were not for this decision, the conditions and deliberations leading up to it would have remained inconclusive. Only through the absolutely contingent decision are the conditions retroactively posited as necessary.

What Hegel seems to be claiming, then, is that all beings and events are contingent or ‘groundless’, a position that would indeed bring him very close to Meillassoux. But is this really the case, or are some things - the laws of nature, the process of history, or the concepts of the *Logic* - excluded from this contingency? If Hegel is not as straightforwardly a partisan of necessity as Meillassoux claims, what is the status of necessity and contingency in his philosophy?

In order to answer this question, let me turn briefly to Žižek’s and Gabriel’s respective engagements with Meillassoux and Hegel. Both of them defend Hegel against Meillassoux by claiming that he does leave room for contingency, and that he is not the thinker of absolute totality Meillassoux claims he is.

Part 3: Necessity and contingency: Žižek and Gabriel on Hegel and Meillassoux

88 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §279.

89 This is Hegel’s famous statement that “in a well-ordered monarchy” the monarch only “says ‘yes’ and dots the ‘i’” (*Philosophy of Right*, §280add).

90 *Ibid.* §281; §282add.

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Similarly to what I have argued so far, Žižek thinks that Meillassoux's interpretation of Hegel is both traditional and mistaken, and that they are in fact much closer than Meillassoux admits. As he puts it, "Meillassoux [does] not openly acknowledge the Hegelian nature of his breakthrough," because "he endorses the standard reading of Hegelian dialectics as the description of the necessary selfdeployment of the Notion."⁹¹ The point on which Žižek sees them converging most particularly is the elimination of the difference between for-us and in-itself, which I discussed above. Meillassoux's "basic strategic move," Žižek claims, which is "deeply Hegelian," is the move "from the gap that separates us (finite humans) from the In-itself to the gap that is immanent to the In-itself"⁹² Meillassoux, like Hegel, transposes the division between in-itself and for-us into the thing itself: the failure of our knowledge to provide an absolute reason for reality as it appears to us is in fact a result of the actual contingency, groundlessness or absence of ultimate reasons in reality itself.

Žižek's views on this matter are a result of his decidedly unorthodox reading of Hegel. The move which he here sees Meillassoux reproducing is, in fact, on his account, the single most important point in Hegel's philosophy, on which his entire interpretation turns:

What makes Hegel unique? One of the ways to circumscribe this uniqueness of Hegel is to use the Lacanian notion of the "lack in the Other" which, in Hegel's case, points towards the unique epistemologico-ontological mediation absent in all three other Idealists: the most elementary figure of dialectical reversal resides in transposing an epistemological obstacle into the thing itself, as its ontological failure (what appears to us as our inability to know the thing indicates a crack in the thing itself, so that our very failure to reach the full truth is the indicator of truth). It is the premise of the present book [*Less than Nothing*] that this "fundamental insight" of Hegel has lost none

⁹¹ Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, 638.

⁹² Ibid.

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of its power today; that it is far more radical (and a far greater threat to metaphysical thinking) than all the combined anti-totality topics of contingency-alterity-heterogeneity.⁹³

As we can see, Žižek's interpretation of Hegel is underwritten by his reading of Lacan, whose notions of the 'non-all', the 'lack in the other' and 'drive' supply the building blocks for Žižek's claim that Hegel is, ultimately, a materialist. While there is no space here to go into Lacan's role in the matter in detail, it is worth looking briefly at Žižek's motivation for his claim about Hegel's materialism. For Meillassoux, materialism consists in the claim that thought can think things which are independent from or indifferent to thought's existence. By contrast, on Žižek's account, Hegel's materialism consists in the fact that Hegel does not (as Meillassoux supposes) reconcile all differences into a stable, harmonious whole: "Materialism has nothing to do with the assertion of the inert density of matter; it is, on the contrary, a position which accepts the ultimate Void of reality — the consequence of its central thesis on the primordial multiplicity is that there is no 'substantial reality', that the only 'substance' of the multiplicity is Void."⁹⁴ Žižek thus opposes materialism to the kind of idealism of which Hegel has traditionally been accused, namely the idea that the ideal is the reconciliation of contradictory reality without remainder or, in other words, that the world is a "closed totality".⁹⁵

For Hegel, reality is not given in advance as a completed whole, the necessary properties of which we then reconstruct in our reflection on it; instead, this 'whole' is continuously reconstructed in the process of its development. This is the meaning of 'retroactivity' in Hegel as Žižek understands it:

93 *Ibid.*, 20.

94 Žižek, 'Interview (with Ben Woodard)', 407.

95 Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2009), 79. See also Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 453.

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because the conditions for an event become necessary only retroactively, necessity is actually contingent: “The process of becoming is not in itself necessary, but is the becoming (the gradual contingent emergence) of necessity itself.”⁹⁶ True, Hegel thinks some things are necessary, but their necessity is not itself grounded in a necessary higher being; rather, it is ultimately contingent, or, in Meillassoux’s terms, factual. Both Hegel and Meillassoux argue therefore, on Žižek’s view, for the “auto-normalization of chaos”: they try to show how both necessity and the stability of the laws of nature emerge from contingency.⁹⁷

There is one point, however, Žižek argues, where Meillassoux falls short of Hegel. In his concern with establishing the possibility of knowledge of things in themselves, Meillassoux basically remains tied to a Kantian framework. The real question, Žižek argues, is not how a subject could gain knowledge of an objective world, but how subjectivity emerges in the world in the first place: “The problem is not ‘Can we penetrate the veil of subjectively constituted phenomena to Things-in-themselves?’ but ‘How do phenomena themselves arise within the flat stupidity of reality which just is; how

96 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 231.

97 Ibid., 637. A detailed account of Hegel’s theory of contingency can be found in Dieter Henrich, ‘Hegels Theorie über den Zufall’, in *Hegel im Kontext* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971), 157–186. Contrary to Meillassoux, Henrich argues that for Hegel things within the world (*innerweltlich Seienden*) are contingent. Necessity (i.e. necessary conceptual-logical structures, necessary ethical forms) arises out of contingent conditions, but this does not make these conditions themselves necessary. It is precisely the mark of necessity that it emerges regardless of what particular contingent circumstances actually obtain (the suggestion being, for example, that even if Einstein hadn’t lived someone else would have discovered relativity) (163). “Being as a whole” (*das Seinganze*) is necessary for Hegel, on Henrich’s view, but this necessity is to be taken only in a moral sense, that is, presumably, in a Fichtean or Kantian sense as a regulative principle (184–185).

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does reality redouble itself and start to appear to itself?’⁹⁸ Because of his anti-subjectalism, Meillassoux becomes blind to the central question of post-Kantian idealism: how is it that reality comes to reflect on itself? What does the existence of thought, of subjectivity, say about reality?⁹⁹

As we have seen above, Gabriel makes the same point. The fact that Hegel and Schelling start from this question about the subject does not mean that they think objects do not exist independently from thought: “Post-Kantian idealism is not a first-order theory according to which there would be no objects if there were not any subjects in the universe. In other words, it is not committed to ontic nonsense, as Meillassoux’s criticism of ‘correlationism’ suggests.”¹⁰⁰ The question is, rather, given that thought is a part of the world, since thought, obviously, exists, what must being be in order for there to be thought?

Hegel ... does not claim that there is some mega-entity, the whole, which encompasses everything else, from spatiotemporal objects to art, religion, and philosophy; the whole is not the all or some kind of other set ... That the true is the whole means rather that the very possibility of truth, of getting things right or wrong, can only be made sense of in higher-order reflection, for it refers to the constitutive conditions of truth-apt thought. In higher-order reflection we discover that the subject belongs to the world, that there is no objective world from which thought can be excluded. This does not entail that there is only thought.

98 Ibid., 643.

99 A similar critical point is made by Martin Hägglund (‘Radical Atheist Materialism: A Critique of Meillassoux’, in *The Speculative Turn*, 114–129), who argues that Meillassoux does not deal with the problem of the existence or emergence of consciousness adequately, and that his claim about the ex nihilo emergence of consciousness in ‘Potentiality and Virtuality’ undermines the core principles of scientific reasoning.

100 Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology*, xx.

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It just means that we have to explain the fact that thoughts exist too.¹⁰¹

Gabriel also concurs with Žižek that necessity for Hegel is always “belated” or retroactive, and therefore the necessity of determined entities is actually contingent.¹⁰² They seem to differ, however, on a crucial point. For Žižek, retroactive causality holds not only for ordinary things or contingent events, but also for the concepts in Hegel’s *Logic*. The *Logic* itself is not a case of linear deduction, where each concept follows from the previous one according to logical necessity; instead, each concept emerges contingently and then retroactively ‘posits’ its conditions as necessary. This is where Gabriel disagrees, and where he opts to go with Schelling over Hegel. Hegel does think, on Gabriel’s account, that his absolute (which is not some kind of entity, but the methodologically self-transparent process of the *Logic* itself)¹⁰³ is non-contingently necessary. Even though for Hegel everything that happens is contingent, the field of possible determinations in which contingent things happen, which Gabriel calls ‘logical space’, is necessary: “According to Hegel, everything that there is, is intelligible, for everything is determined in the overall conceptual network of logical space. Since there can, in principle, be nothing outside of logical space, the reflection of logical space on itself is the only absolute available. Given that this absolute reflection takes place in the *Science of Logic*, Hegel can claim to expose the absolute, to make it explicit.”¹⁰⁴ According to Schelling, by contrast, the fact that there is anything whatsoever, and that this something is determined or determinable, is itself contingent: “It is impossible to go behind the necessary existence of an origin, to get to the nonconceptual being of

101 Ibid., xxi.

102 Ibid., 131–132.

103 Ibid., 113.

104 Ibid., 119.

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the whole and to find there a motivating reason or ground that makes sense of this being itself as world. That anything whatsoever is, that is, that there is anything determinate, that being in the sense of determinacy is, is wholly groundless, resultant of a transition Schelling coins ‘willing.’¹⁰⁵ Unlike for Hegel, for Schelling the fact of the existence of logical space in which beings are determined is itself contingent.¹⁰⁶ Schelling thereby allows for a “margin of contingency” which Hegel, Gabriel claims, “obsessively seek[s] to overcome.”¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

There is no space here to go into the details of the question of contingency and necessity in Hegel and Schelling. On the whole, it seems that Žižek’s and Gabriel’s interpretations of Hegel provide a useful correction to Meillassoux’s overly hasty and traditional criticisms. With regards to the status of necessity and contingency, however, both of their readings of Hegel, as well as Meillassoux’s own theory, raise more questions than they answer. In particular, we have to ask: how far can contingency go, and what becomes of necessity? Contingency, it seems, is the new difference: the rallying cry of all detractors of necessity, identity and totality. But if everything is contingent, how do we explain the stability of the laws of nature and logic?¹⁰⁸ Take Hegel’s argument for

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 92.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 132.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 121.

¹⁰⁸ Johnston makes this point against Meillassoux (‘Hume’s Revenge: À Dieu, Meillassoux?’; 101): “In terms of scientific practice, Meillassoux’s speculative materialism, centered on the omnipotent sovereign capriciousness of an absolute time of ultimate contingency, either makes no difference whatsoever (i.e., self-respecting scientists ignore it for a number of very good theoretical and practical reasons) or licenses

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the ‘groundlessness’ of things coming into existence: if this holds not only for human projects and decisions, but also for natural events, how do we explain the repeatability of scientific experiments? The same goes for the laws of logic: if they were contingent, wouldn’t meaning and knowledge be impossible? If everything is ultimately contingent, we still have to explain the success of science as well as the everyday garden-variety necessity which underlies our expectations and actions, and show how it arises from contingency. Both Meillassoux and Hegel seem to go in this direction. Hegel gives us a lot more to go on than Meillassoux - but then again, Hegel isn’t going to write any more books, and Meillassoux might.

It should be clear, in any case, that Meillassoux and Hegel have much more in common than a superficial reading of *After Finitude* would indicate. Meillassoux’s disavowal of Hegel seems to be an inheritance from an earlier generation of French philosophers who, traumatized by the spectre of a rather stereotyped Hegel, renounced him as the ultimate thinker of identity, totality and teleological history, while dealing with Hegel’s actual texts as little as possible (Derrida here being the exception). A more balanced approach to Hegel, which deals less with general methodological questions or the overall intent and character of Hegel’s philosophy and more with the actual content of his highly varied (and without doubt, at many points highly flawed) theoretical experiments, would be more productive.

past scientific mistakes and/or present bad science being sophistically conjured away by cheap-and-easy appeals to hyper-Chaos.” Hallward also makes a similar point (‘Anything is Possible’, 138-139).