

From the Ultimate God to the Virtual God: Post-Ontotheological Perspectives on the Divine in Heidegger, Badiou, and Meillassoux

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Abstract

The Heideggerian account of the ontotheological constitution of Western metaphysics has been extremely influential for contemporary philosophy of religion and for philosophical perspectives on theology and the divine. This paper introduces and contrasts two central strategies for approaching the question of the divine in a non- or post-ontotheological manner. The first and more established approach is that of post-Heideggerian hermeneutics and deconstruction, inspired by Heidegger's suggestion of a "theology without the word 'being'" and by his later notions of an "ultimate god" and of "divinities" as one of the four axes of the fourfold (*Geviert*). Here, the divine is no longer articulated in terms of the supreme or absolute being, but as one of the interdependent dimensions of finite and contextual meaningful presence. The more recent approach introduced by Alain Badiou and Quentin Meillassoux dissociates itself from the Heideggerian hermeneutics of finitude and adopts mathematics as its basic ontological model. Rather than focusing on meaning and sense, Badiou and Meillassoux replace ontotheological metaphysics with materialist frameworks. With regard to the divine, this approach leads either to a contemporary version of atheism (Badiou) or to the reintroduction of a divine entity, but now a merely possible and contingent one (Meillassoux).

Keywords: Heidegger, Badiou, Meillassoux, ontotheology, metaphysics, God, divine, theology, hermeneutics, materialism

1. Hermeneutical and materialist post-ontotheologies

The concept of ontotheology and the analysis of the ontotheological constitution of the Western metaphysical tradition—of the inherent tendency of metaphysics to posit an absolute point of reference for all beings, identified by Aristotle

and Aristotelian Scholasticism with the metaphysical divinity—have been among the most prominent aspects of Martin Heidegger’s philosophical legacy. The hermeneutical and deconstructive “weak” perspectives on theology, religion, and the divine introduced by thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Gianni Vattimo, Jean-Luc Marion, John Caputo, Richard Kearney, and Merold Westphal have been particularly inspired by Heidegger’s allusion, in a 1951 seminar in Zürich, to the idea of a theology without the word “being”¹—hence the title of Marion’s *God without Being (Dieu sans l’être, 1988)*—and by the enigmatic and underdeveloped description, in *Contributions to Philosophy (Beiträge zur Philosophie, 1936–38)*, of an “ultimate god” (*der letzte Gott*) that is sharply differentiated from the ontotheological God of Aristotelian metaphysics and Christian Scholasticism. In France, the prominence of the post-Heideggerian philosophical interest in religion was addressed by Dominique Janicaud (1991; Janicaud et al. 2000) as a “theological turn” in French phenomenology.

However, in recent years, we have witnessed the emergence of a very different approach to ontotheology—one that, to a certain extent, accepts Heidegger’s diagnosis of a strong ontotheological tendency inherent in Western metaphysics, yet rejects many of the philosophical consequences that Heidegger draws from this diagnosis. This is the avenue introduced by Alain Badiou and further developed by his pupil, Quentin Meillassoux. For Badiou and Meillassoux, the closure of ontotheology by no means implies a radical rupture or transformation of the classical philosophical project as such. Non-ontotheological thinking, they argue, does not necessarily entail a fundamental overhaul of the Western philosophical tradition as a whole or a hermeneutic embracement of a “weak” thinking devoid of absoluteness and universality. They are specifically opposed to the Heideggerian *finitization* of thinking, the roots of which they trace back to Kant’s critical philosophy. Meillassoux, in particular, has argued that Kant’s “Copernican revolution,” with its shift of philosophical focus to the correlation between thinking and being that is subsequently thematized by Heidegger as a factual, context-sensitive, and historically situated process, has

led to the progressive deabsolutization of thinking that Meillassoux precisely seeks to overcome by showing that it ultimately rests on an implicit absolute thesis, namely, that of absolute *contingency*. For both Badiou and Meillassoux, the tool required to overcome the contemporary philosophy of finitude is *mathematics*, the ontological appropriation of which—and that of post-Cantorian set theory in particular—allows non-ontotheological ontological frameworks ultimately committed to forms of *materialism*.

In what follows, I will briefly compare the Heideggerian hermeneutical notion of post-ontotheological thinking to the Badiouan and Meillassouxian materialist versions. Such a preliminary comparison will enable us to see how replacing the meaning- and language-centered orientation of Heidegger's "poetic" or "correlationist" postmetaphysics (and, in a sense, of post-Kantian philosophy as a whole) with an approach based on the absolute ontological significance of mathematics and set theory can also lead to a new kind of rationalism regarding philosophy's relation to divinity and the divine.

2. Divinity without "being": Heidegger and the ultimate god

Despite its strong association with the Heideggerian deconstruction of Western metaphysics, the term "ontotheology" was not coined by Heidegger but—significantly from the point of view of Meillassoux's reading of Heidegger as a kind of "ultimate Kantian"—by Kant. In the transcendental dialectic of his first *Critique*, Kant (1998a, 699–700 [A 631–32; B 659–60]; 1998b, 584) distinguishes two main forms of rational theology: transcendental theology (a "deistic" approach to the deity based on the concepts of pure reason) and natural theology (a "theistic" approach based on concepts from empirical nature). Transcendental theology is further divided into ontotheology (based on purely conceptual arguments, e.g., that the concept of the supreme being necessarily entails its existence) and cosmotheology (based on the transcendental implications of a certain type of experience, e.g., that of one's own existence); the main types of natural theology are physicotheology (based on

the observed causal order of natural things) and moral theology (based on the moral order observed in the world). Construed as attempts to prove the objective reality of God as the supreme being, Kant argues, even cosmotheology and physicotheology are ultimately ontotheological modes of deducing the necessary *existence* of a supreme being from the necessity of the *concept* of a supreme being. This, however, is for Kant a speculative move that illegitimately supposes being (existence) to be a “real predicate,” an attribute that adds something to a concept and without which it would be less perfect. Transcendental theology can therefore only have a negative function immanent to reason: it shows that the structure of theoretical rationality inherently requires a transcendental ideal of perfection for which an objective counterpart can never be found in experience and the existence of which can therefore never be proven or disproven (Kant 1998a, 706–07 [A 640–41; B 668–69]; 1998b, 588). In his *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant (1996, 239–46; 2003, 167–77 [A 223–37; AA 124–32]) goes on to show that a form of moral theology, which shows the necessity of a supreme good as a practical postulate of moral agency and as an object of “moral faith,” remains viable and practically necessary, but this is precisely a non-*ontotheological* approach that does not constitute a theoretical “proof” of God’s objective reality.

In the Kantian critique of ontotheology, and in the subsequent notion of the divinity as a regulative rational ideal to which it is illegitimate to attribute being in the sense of objective existence, it is possible to see a prototype of the Heideggerian “theology without ‘being’.” However, the Heideggerian use of the term “ontotheology” is much wider and has a broader historical perspective.² While Kant associates ontotheology with the use of ontological arguments for theological ends, historically associated with Scholasticism and Descartes, Heidegger employs the term to designate the use of theology for ontological purposes, a tendency paradigmatically exhibited by the basic structure of the Aristotelian *Metaphysics*.

The “first philosophy” that constitutes the subject matter of the *Metaphysics* is famously characterized by Aristotle as a science of being *qua* being (*to on hē on*; *Metaphysics*

Γ.1.1003a21–32), i.e., as a general ontology of everything that in some sense *is*. The obvious problem of ontology as a science is its extreme generality. “Being as such” cannot function as the most general kind or genus of all things (B.3.998b22–27; H.6.1045b6; *Posterior Analytics* II.7.92b13–14); Aristotle’s theory of definition precludes the possibility of one supreme genus that would comprise everything, since its subspecies could not be differentiated using meaningful criteria independent of the genus and the subspecies (*Metaphysics* Z.12.1037b29–1038a35; *Topics* VI.6.144a28–b11). The supreme genera are thus the different categories and modalities of being, and being as such (*to on*) is a “transcendental” determination in the Scholastic sense of transcending the limits of even the supreme genera or kinds of beings and is itself without a general definition. Being is articulated in several different senses (*to on legetai pollachōs*) that are not reducible to any single basic meaning (Γ.2.1003a33). Even so, “being” is not a purely equivocal term; its many different senses are still related to a unity and to some single nature (*pros hen kai mian tina physin*; 1003a33–34), to a single principle (*pros mian archēn*; 1003b6). Like “being,” the term “healthy” (*hygieinon*) is used in several irreducibly different senses, but these are all related, albeit in different ways, to health as an *ideal* state of a living body: a healthy complexion is a *sign* of health, healthy habits are *means* for attaining and preserving health, and so on (1003a34–b4). In the case of being, the corresponding ideal or standard sense is *ousia*, “substance” or, more broadly, “beingness”—the mode of being of a separate, determinate, and ontologically independent particular thing (1003b6–19; Z.1.1028a10–b4). *Ousia* is the point of reference for the different senses and hierarchies of being: it is substantial being as opposed to predicable being, actuality as opposed to potency, and so on.

However, concrete material substances involve a problematic ontological duality, exposed in *Metaphysics* Z, H, and Θ. On the one hand, their beingness—that which makes them the determinate things they are—consists in their species-form (*eidōs*), i.e., that which makes them *what* they are, instantiations of a specific type of thing (Z.3.1029a7–30;

17.1041b5–9). On the other hand, form alone does not constitute a concrete spatiotemporal thing, a “this”; for this purpose, an additional individuating matter (*hylē*) is required (H.1.1042a24–31). Because of the matter-form twofoldness, the beingness (*ousia*) of concrete material things cannot be the ultimate unifying reference point of all beings. This can only be an ideal entity, an ideal instance of *ousia*—perfectly simple and indivisible, perfectly actual and perfectly identical with its own essence (Λ.1.1069a18–b2; 6.1071b2–7). This is the God (*theos*) of metaphysics, the absolutely self-sufficient “thought thinking itself” (*noēsis noēseōs*)—the ultimate “final cause” of all things, the unmoved mover whose ontological perfection all material, transient, and contingent things strive to emulate (7.1072a19–b30; 8.1074a33–37; 9.1074b17–1075a5). When the particular structure of its subject matter is properly understood, ontology, the science of being as such, can only be realized in the form of theology, of the science of the supreme mode of being. “General metaphysics” is implemented through a “special metaphysics,” but one that studies precisely the ultimate point of reference and ideal for *all* beings, i.e., the perfection of beingness (E.1.1026a23–32).

This Aristotelian conflation of ontology and theology—the move of thinking that proves the ontological necessity of a supreme being and by so doing brings ontology to its culmination—is precisely what Heidegger understands by ontotheology. He repeatedly returns to the ontological-theological twofoldness of Aristotle’s determination of first philosophy in his early lecture courses³, and summarizes it in his 1949 introduction to *What Is Metaphysics?* in the following way:

[...] metaphysics represents the beingness [*Seiendheit*] of beings in a twofold manner: in the first place, the totality of beings as such with an eye to their most universal traits (*on katholou, koinon*); but at the same time also the totality of beings as such in the sense of the highest and therefore divine being (*on katholou, akrotaton, theion*). In the metaphysics of Aristotle, the unconcealedness of beings as such is specifically developed in this twofold manner [...]. According to its essence, metaphysics is at the same time both ontology in the narrower sense, and theology. (Heidegger 1996, 378–79; 1998d, 287)

The term “ontotheology” is adopted in Heidegger’s 1930–31 course on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* to designate the tendency of Hegel’s speculative idealism, inherited from ancient metaphysics, to orient the question of being to the divine, which Hegel grasps in terms of his speculative logic (Heidegger 1988b, 140–43; 1994b, 97–99). The term is then used repeatedly in connection with Plato (Heidegger 1996, 235–36; 1998d, 180–81), Kant (Heidegger 1996, 449; 1998d, 340), Hegel (Heidegger 1989, 206; 1999, 144; 2002c, 152; 2003b, 202–03; 2009, 81; 2012, 161), Schelling (Heidegger 1985, 51, 66; 1995b, 62, 79), and Nietzsche (Heidegger 1991d, 210; 1998c, 314). Heidegger’s perhaps most lucid formulation of the ontotheological mode of thought can be found in his 1944–46 essay on “Nihilism as Determined by the History of Being”:

Of course, metaphysics acknowledges that beings [*Seiendes*] are not without being [*Sein*]. But scarcely has it said so when it again relocates being [*Sein*] in a being [*Seiendes*] [...]. The grounding of being—which has barely been given a thought—in the most-being [*Seiendsten*] of beings proceeds, in accordance with the metaphysical question, from beings as such. [...] Because metaphysics, in thinking beings as such, is approached by being but thinks it on the basis of and with reference to beings, metaphysics as such must therefore speak out (*legein*) the *theion* in the sense of the supremely being ground. Metaphysics is inherently theology. It is theology to the extent that it speaks out beings *qua* beings, *on hē on*. Ontology is simultaneously and necessarily theology. (1991d, 208–09; 1998c, 311, 312, 313; tr. mod.)

Ontotheology, for Heidegger, is the approach in which the basic ontological question concerning being (*Sein*) as such—apart from all of its particular instances, all individual things that *are*, beings—encounters the universality and indeterminacy of “being as such” and theologically resorts to the supreme and ideal *instance* of being, the most-being of beings, as the absolute point of reference of all beings. While ontotheological metaphysics starts from the very acknowledgement of the fact that being as such is not identical with any particular thing that is, it ultimately fails to think this *difference* between being and that-which-is in positive terms (2002c, 274–75; 2003b, 364–65). Precisely because of the fact that being as such is not determinable in the way specific beings are, ontotheology ends up determining being as such in terms of the *supreme* being. In

his most profound and demanding discussion of ontotheology, *The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics* (1957), Heidegger puts this in another way: since metaphysics essentially looks at being as the ground (*Grund*) of all that is, and thinks of ground in terms of a “cause” (*Ursache*) that is itself something determinate, it ends up pointing to God, the supreme being, as the primal (and ultimate) final *cause* of all things that is also its *own* cause.

[...] the matter [*Sache*] of thinking is beings [*das Seiende*] as such, that is, being [*Sein*]. Being shows itself in the essential mode of a ground [*Grundes*]. Accordingly, the matter of thinking, being as the ground, is thought out fully only when the ground is represented as the first ground, *prōtē archē*. The original matter of thinking presents itself as the primal cause [*Ur-sache*], the *causa prima* that corresponds to the establishing [*begründenden*] recourse to the *ultima ratio*, the final account [*Rechenschaft*]. The being of beings is represented fundamentally, in the sense of the ground, only as *causa sui*. This is the metaphysical concept of God. Metaphysics must think in the direction of the deity because the matter of thinking is being—namely, being as ground, in diverse ways [...]. (2002a, 51; 2002b, 59–60; tr. mod.)

In Heidegger’s historical narrative, ontotheological thinking originates with Plato, more specifically in Book VI of the *Republic* (508d4–509c2), where the Idea of the Good is singled out as the Idea of Ideas, as the Idea of ideality as such that makes possible all the other Ideas as the ideal conceptual identities of particular things (Heidegger 1996, 235–36; 1998d, 180–81). Since its Platonic-Aristotelian inauguration, Heidegger (2002a, 45; 2002b, 54) maintains, the basic framework of the entire ancient, medieval, and modern metaphysical tradition up to Hegel and Nietzsche remains ontotheological. That Heidegger views Nietzsche, the minister of the “death of God,” as a culmination of ontotheological thinking highlights the fact that his notion of ontotheology is not limited to the metaphysical models in which the metaphysical or Christian God holds an absolute position. Rather, ontotheology stands for the *absolutizing* tendency of Western philosophy as such, for the quest for an absolute point of reference for all things. Starting from Descartes, the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic-Scholastic deity gradually surrenders its metaphysical role to *subjectivity*, in the sense of the

indubitably certain self-consciousness of the thinking ego.⁴ Even Kant remains ontotheological in the Heideggerian sense: for Kant's transcendental idealism, the "unity of transcendental apperception," i.e., the potential association of the representation "I think" with all other representations (Kant 1998a, 178–81, 215–16 [A 106–108; B 131–136]; 1998b, 246–48), holds the role of a universal (albeit immanent and non-absolute) point of reference.⁵ The ontotheological hierarchy implicit in Kant's critical philosophy is absolutized in speculative idealism, particularly at the end of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, where the Absolute Idea—the absolutely comprehensive determination—is identified with being (*Sein*) in its dialectically fully unfolded sense (Hegel 1981, 236; 2010, 735; Heidegger 1997b, 383–384; 2006b, 339–40; 2008b, 46). Being as such and the supreme instance of being are thus conflated, and this is the first stage in the conclusion of ontotheology, one that leaves no more conceptual leeway for the development of metaphysics in its rational-speculative form. In Heidegger's reading, however, it is Nietzsche who makes the last move of modern ontotheology by replacing the theoretical and speculative notion of subjectivity with a *willing* subjectivity—with a notion of subjectivity as the *will to power* that ultimately wills nothing exterior to itself.⁶

This narrative provides the cue for the key topic of Heidegger's later thinking, the "other beginning" (*der andere Anfang*) of Western thought delineated in *Contributions to Philosophy* and related texts.⁷ Very generally speaking, the other beginning would transform the first (Greek) beginning(s) of philosophy and metaphysics into a post-Nietzschean and post-metaphysical approach that would renounce the quest for absoluteness altogether and hermeneutically embrace the radical finitude, historicity, and context-specificity of thinking. We cannot here go into the details of this fundamental transformation of which Heidegger produced only more or less preparatory and fragmentary drafts. However, what interests us with regard to our topic and from the point of view of the reappropriation of the Heideggerian critique of ontotheology in contemporary theology, are the transformations in the notions of the deity and divinity that the end of ontotheology would

entail. Of this, Heidegger gives us some clues. At the end of *The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics*, he famously notes that “the god-less thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy, god as *causa sui*, is [...] perhaps closer to the divine [*göttlichen*] god.” (Heidegger 2002a, 64–65; 2002b, 72; tr. mod.)

Even though Heidegger’s brief draft on the “ultimate god” in the *Contributions* remains for the most part shrouded in the enigmatic postmetaphysical shorthand of the work and replete with nuances and aspects that we cannot begin to unravel here, its main outline is quite clear.⁸ The ultimate god is “completely other to the previous ones, particularly to the Christian one” (Heidegger 1989, 403; 1999, 283; 2012, 319) and in this sense can be identified with the “divine god” to which the post-ontotheological “god-less thinking” remains open. Whereas the Christian God became interpreted in Aristotelian-Scholastic terms as the most-being of all beings and thus as the foundation of the hierarchical metaphysical “system of being,” the god of the Heideggerian “other beginning”

is neither a “being” [*seiend*] nor an “non-being” [*unseiend*], and also not to be equated with *beyng* [*Seyn*, i.e., postmetaphysically reconsidered being]. Rather, *beyng* abides [*west*] temporally and spatially as that “between” [*Zwischen*] that can never be grounded in god but also not in the human being as something occurring [*vorhandenes*] and living, but only in *Da-sein*. (Heidegger 1989, 263; 1999, 185–86; 2012, 207; tr. mod.)⁹

While ancient and medieval metaphysics situated the Archimedean point of “beings as a whole” in God’s perfection and modern metaphysics relocated it in the immanence of the thinking (human) subjectivity, Heideggerian postmetaphysics makes both of these former points of reference interdependent dimensions or poles in a multidimensional and multipolar event of the spatiotemporal contextualization of meaningful presence, i.e., in the event or “taking-place” (*Ereignis*) of *beyng* (*Seyn*). Just like the Heideggerian “subject,” the human being who is no longer simply identical with *Da-sein*, i.e., with the dynamic context or place into which *beyng* “takes place,” but simply one of its essential contributors or participants, the Heideggerian deity has become radically deabsolutized: far from being the

paradigm of self-sufficient and substantial being, the divine is merely one of the interdependent aspects of contextualized meaningfulness. It has no subsistence outside the process of contextualization but is radically dependent upon it. What is at stake in the postmetaphysical transformation is the “recognition of the belonging of the human being to beyng [*Seyn*] through god, the admission [*Eingeständnis*] by god that it needs beyng, an admission that does not relinquish god or its greatness.” (Heidegger 1989, 413; 1999, 291; 2012, 327; tr. mod.) For Heidegger, an important aspect of the greatness of the postmetaphysical poet Hölderlin lies in the latter’s invention, in Verse VIII of his hymn *The Rhine*, of a deabsolutized divinity, of a meaning-bestowing dimension that is itself dependent on being acknowledged and received by the human being.¹⁰

Arguably the most developed account of the Heideggerian postmetaphysical divinity, and one that is deeply informed by Hölderlin’s language, is the late account of the fourfold (*Geviert*), in which the “divinities” (*die Göttlichen*) figure as one of the four meaning-dimensions that converge in the singular and situated meaningfulness of a particular thing. None of these dimensions, including the divine one, is independent of their reciprocal intertwining in the thing as a focal point of experienced meaning (Heidegger 2000b, 172; 2001a, 177). The divinities, in the plural, are the “beckoning [*winkenden*] envoys of the deity [*Gottheit*]. From the concealed prevailing [*Walten*] of these [divinities], god appears in its essence [*Wesen*], which withdraws it beyond any comparison with what is present [*dem Anwesenden*].” (2000b, 171; 2001a, 176; tr. mod.) The deity is the dimension of ultimate purpose—it is not a present and self-subsistent entity but rather a dimension of radical *futurity* that appears and is encountered through its different aspects, the divine “indications” or “hints” (*Winke*) of an ultimate meaning. This god “has” no being but is a dimension of the meaningful taking-place (*Ereignis*) of being as a divinity always yet *to come*, not as an eschatological future present expected or anticipated by humans, but as the futural dimension of purpose towards which the “futural ones of the ultimate god” (*die Zukünftigen des letzten Gottes*; 1989, 399; 1999, 280; 2012, 316), i.e., the

postontotheological “theologians,” are primarily oriented and which in this sense “awaits” human beings (1989, 417; 1999, 293; 2012, 330).

3. Against poetic theology and fideism: Badiou’s contemporary atheism and Meillassoux’s virtual god

In his *Briefings on Existence (Court traité d’ontologie transitoire*, 1998), Alain Badiou presents a succinct but highly interesting discussion of what he calls Heidegger’s “aporia,” referring to the latter’s (Heidegger 2000a, 671; 1993b, 107) famous words in his 1966 interview for *Der Spiegel*: “How can it be that the thinker who determined metaphysics as onto-theology, an overshadowing of the question of being [*être*] by that of the supreme being [*étant*], ends up saying in his testament that only a god can save us?” (Badiou 1998, 18; 2006a, 27–28; tr. mod.) Badiou is well aware that Heidegger has in mind a type of god that is identical neither with the God of metaphysics nor with the God of the monotheistic religions, but rather corresponds to the Hölderlinian divinity, “the God of poets,” an ultimate source of meaningfulness, “that from which [...] there is the enchantment of the world.” (Badiou 1998, 18–19; 2006a, 28) The passive prospect of a “divine intervention” involves a poetic, nostalgic, and melancholic vision of a “re-enchantment” of the world through the emergence of a new dimension of ultimate purposiveness. Thus, the (Heideggerian) “deconstruction of metaphysics and assent given to the death of the Christian God has held the chances open for the God of the poem.” (1998, 19; 2006a, 29)

“To say “only a god can save us” means: the thinking informed by the poets [...] may uphold [...] the possibility, devoid of any way or means open to utterance, of a resacralization of the earth.” (1989, 32; 1999, 51; tr. mod.)

For Badiou, such a poetic longing for the arrival of divinity—as well as what he regards as Heidegger’s “poetic ontology” as a whole—cannot avoid having reactionary intellectual and political implications, as is evident, he thinks, from Heidegger’s attempt at overcoming contemporary “technical nihilism” and from his infamous political error.

(1989, 7–12, 33–40; 1999, 27–32, 53–60) In Badiou’s eyes, contemporary “antiphilosophy,” with its resigned pessimism regarding the prospects of the classical philosophical project and of the progressive enterprises of modernity in general, is directly informed by the Heideggerian “suturing” of philosophy to poetry and by the associated dream of a “salvation” in the form of a re-enchantment by meaning of the homogenized and inherently meaningless contemporary technical reality. (1989, 7–12, 21–26, 49–58; 1999, 27–32, 41–45, 69–77) Overcoming the late modern predicament therefore entails, Badiou maintains, the adoption of a “contemporary atheism,” one that surrenders not only the ontotheological divinity but the poetic one as well. (1998, 20; 2006, 29) A key point in this approach is the attack on the central topic of Heidegger’s thinking: *finitude*, which Badiou sees as a part of contemporary philosophy’s Kantian legacy.¹¹

That our exposure to being is essentially finite and that we must forever return to our mortal-being, is the fact from which we endure the living God’s death only to uphold, under multiple shapes, the indistinct promise of a sense that has withdrawn, but whose “come-back” has not been debarred. [...] It is thus imperative, so as to be serenely established in the irreversible element of God’s death, to finish up with the motif of finitude. [...] the aim is to finish up with the motif of finitude and its hermeneutical escort. (Badiou 1998, 20, 21; 2006a, 29, 30; tr. mod.)

The method for achieving this break with the Heideggerian hermeneutics of finitude is famously discovered by Badiou in mathematics—more specifically, in post-Cantorian set theory, with its revolutionary new way of mathematizing the infinite in the form of different infinite multiplicities with different cardinalities. The key ontological import of set theory is, for Badiou, its ability to dissociate the notion of infinity from the metaphysical notion of an ultimate and supreme *unity* of being, of an ultimate and absolute point of reference that would unify *all* finite and determinate things—in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, the metaphysical God. From the recognition that all beings cannot be brought under one univocal concept or “set”—i.e., that there can be no “universal set,” that the totality of beings is an *inconsistent* multiplicity in Cantor’s sense (Badiou 1988, 53; 2005, 41)—Aristotle deduced that ontology

must take recourse in the supreme being as the absolutely universal reference point, “infinite” in the sense that it is beyond any material and spatiotemporal specificity.¹² This is precisely how Badiou defines ontotheology in his *magnum opus*, *Being and Event*, the main exposition of his equation of ontology with mathematics: ontotheology is the metaphysical approach “for which the absolute is thought as a supreme infinite being, thus as transmathematical, in-numerable, as a form of the one so radical that no multiple can consist therein.” (1988, 53; 2005, 42; cf. 1988, 161–62; 2005, 142–43) Against ontotheology, Badiou posits his mathematical, set-theoretical ontology, which accepts only consistent multiplicities—ones that can be treated as sets—and for which an inconsistent multiplicity simply *is not*, is *non-being*. In other words, for mathematical ontology, *the one*, in the sense of an ultimate and absolute unity, *is not*. (1988, 53–54; 2005, 42)

This is the foundational “decision” of Badiou’s ontology, which he considers to be a break with the history of ontotheological metaphysics: there is no unity or totality of being, no Archimedean point for everything. Rather, being as such is pure, inconsistent multiplicity that resists all unification (1988, 33, 550, 555; 2005, 25, 511, 519). Unity pertains only to particular instances or “presentations” of being—“situations” or “worlds”—which are consistent multiplicities based on a unifying, structuring operation of “count-as-one” that determines what, in each particular situation, is to be counted as *a* being. (1988, 31–39, 104–05, 539, 557; 2005, 23–30, 90, 504, 522) Being as such, that which is fundamentally presented in all structured situations of being, is beyond consistent multiplicities and the unities they are composed of; it “is” a multiplicity only in retrospect, in the sense of “not-one,” of being beyond the structured sets that ontology operates with. For Badiou, such an ontology also constitutes a break with Heideggerian post-ontotheological hermeneutics, which still looks if not to an ultimate unity, at least to an ultimate dimension of sense and purpose inherent in being as the taking-place of finite and situated meaningfulness. Heidegger’s “poetic” ontology is still preoccupied with what has always been the focal topic of metaphysics: being as meaningful

presence or intelligibility, which accordingly sees ontology as a study of meaning (1988, 16; 2005 9–10). In its Badiouan sense as the inconsistent multiplicity that precedes all structured consistency, being is the inherently meaningless, homogenous, undifferentiated, and inarticulate “raw material” of situations or worlds. As Badiou points out in a 1997 interview with Peter Hallward, this can be rendered as a fundamentally materialist approach: “‘Matter’ would simply be, immediately after being, the most general possible name of the presented (of ‘what is presented’). [...] I am a materialist in the sense that I think that any presentation is material.” (Badiou 2001, 130) Such a mathematical, materialist ontology invites us to

restitute the infinite to the banality of manifold-being [...]. [...] the destiny of every situation is the infinite manifold of sets. Depth cannot ever develop there, and the homogeneity of the manifold ontologically prevails over the play of intensities. [...] the search for sense is reduced for us to the sole numbering of this infinity [...]. (Badiou 1998, 21–22; 2006, 30)

One of the central accomplishments of this model is, for Badiou, that it makes *any* notion of divinity superfluous. It confirms the “death,” proclaimed by Nietzsche, of the Christian God; by abandoning the notion of ultimate unity, it dispenses with the need for the ontotheological God of metaphysics; and thirdly, it also makes the Heideggerian post-ontotheological divinity, the “God of poetry” unnecessary by adopting a basic “nihilism” in the sense of an understanding of being as such as inherently meaningless. What Badiou shares with his great contemporary Deleuze is a commitment to a fundamental *immanence*, divested of all references to transcendence, either ontotheologically or hermeneutically conceived.¹³ “Committed to the triple destitution of the gods, we [...] can assert that everything is here, always here, and that thought’s reserve lies in the thoroughly informed and firmly declared egalitarian platitude of what befalls upon us here.” (Badiou 1998, 23; 2006, 31) The sole dimension of purpose lies within the subjective truth-processes—politics, art, science, and love—that indefinitely reconfigure the world of immanence in terms of a potentially transformative historical event; thus, for Badiou (1997; 2003), even the apostle Paul becomes a pre-eminently

political figure, faithfully committed to the revolutionizing event of Christ's death.¹⁴

In his breakthrough work *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (*Après la finitude: essai sur la nécessité de la contingence*, 2006), Quentin Meillassoux adopts the essential core of the Badiouan understanding of ontotheology and of the problematic consequences of the Heideggerian attempt at overcoming it. As is announced by its title, the book is essentially aimed at uncovering the inner inconsistencies and philosophical limitations of the Kantian topic of the inherent *finitude* of thinking and its hermeneutical developments and variations. Meillassoux's argumentation is informed by his brilliant analysis of what he sees as the dominant framework of Western philosophy as a whole since Kant: *correlationism*, the approach that sets out from the philosophical irreducibility of the correlation between being and thinking (in the widest possible sense that comprises knowledge, experience, consciousness, discourse, language, and willing) and maintains that being and thinking are inconceivable apart from one another (Meillassoux 2006a, 18–23; 2008a, 5–9). In addition to Kantian transcendental idealism (“weak correlationism”), which retains the necessity of an absolute (but unknowable) level of “things in themselves” beyond the domain of the transcendental structures of the correlation—and was later converted by Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel into an absolute idealism that denies the intelligibility of things in themselves and absolutizes the correlation itself—the correlationist framework also comprises the Heideggerian hermeneutics of finitude (“strong correlationism”), which denies the intelligibility of things in themselves but also promotes the radical *facticity* (i.e., non-absoluteness, matter-of-factness, lack of absolute justification) of the correlation, thus denying thinking access to *any* kind of absolute. (Meillassoux 2006a, 42–60; 2008a, 30–43)

Through a highly original and intricate chain of argumentation Meillassoux (2006a, 69–109; 2008a, 50–81) concludes, however, that in order to truly distinguish itself from absolute idealism and to avoid internal contradiction, strong correlationism must ultimately *absolutize* its principle of

facticity—i.e., maintain that an absolute entity or level of being is not only inconceivable and unthinkable but in fact absolutely *impossible*, thus turning the principle of facticity into an absolute principle of *contingency*. All experienced things, all the structures of experiences, as well as *experience as such*, i.e., the prevailing of the *correlation itself*, are not only given to thinking as mere facts without any visible absolute logical necessity, but indeed *absolutely* unfounded, unnecessary, and contingent facts. But if this is the case, the strong correlationist deabsolutization of thinking has ultimately failed: it is compelled to retain a “minimal absoluteness,” i.e., the *absolute validity* of the *non-absoluteness* of all things as such. It is *necessary* that *nothing*—no thing or event, not even the happening of the correlation between being and thinking, i.e., the taking-place of meaningful presence—*is necessary*. As is shown especially by Heidegger’s “transcendentalization” of mortality, of the experience of the “possibility of its own impossibility” as the ultimate possibility of *Dasein* (Heidegger 2001b, 260–267, 316–323; 2010, 249–255, 302–309), the absence of the correlation—and, thus, a reality *without* thinking—is absolutely conceivable. But if this is accepted, the correlationist framework bursts apart and strong correlationism is converted into what Meillassoux (2006a, 168; 2008a, 121) terms a *speculative materialism*: an absolute certainty of the thinkability of being-without-thinking.¹⁵ However, the thinking that can think this reality beyond meaningful presence can obviously no longer assume the form of a phenomenology or hermeneutics of sense and meaning. Following Badiou, Meillassoux (2006a, 37, 176–77; 2008a, 26, 127–28) claims that it can operate only in terms of *mathematics*. Mathematics, and set theory in particular, is the formal method of thinking a reality independent of thinking.

Meillassoux’s speculative philosophy is a genuine *system* in the sense that it professes to deduce all of its elements from its fundamental principle, namely, that of absolute contingency. Even the absolute bearing of mathematics is to be thus derived, although Meillassoux has thus far postponed this derivation to forthcoming works (2006a, 152–53; 2008a, 110–11). Meillassoux’s refutation of ontotheology is as such not directly

based on the acceptance of a mathematical ontology, but is an independent direct consequence of the principle of contingency. By absolutizing facticity, we obtain the thesis that

it is absolutely necessary that every being [*étant*] might not exist. This is indeed a speculative thesis, since we are thinking an absolute, but it is not metaphysical, since we are not thinking any *thing* (any being) that would *be* absolute. The absolute is the absolute impossibility of a necessary being. (2006a, 82; 2008a, 60; tr. mod.)

We see from this dissociation of speculative thinking (one that claims access to some form of absolute) and metaphysical thinking (one that claims access to some form of absolute *being*) that Meillassoux understands “metaphysics” in a strongly Heideggerian sense, one that coincides with “ontotheology,” i.e., with the positing of a “supreme being” as an absolute point of reference for all things. Meillassoux, too, thus subscribes to the diagnosis of the end of metaphysics. Like Badiou, however, he disagrees with the specific postmetaphysical prospects of Heideggerian hermeneutics. Meillassoux’s specific point of contention with Heidegger is the latter’s notion that renouncing ontotheological absolutes inevitably means renouncing *all* philosophical absolutes. *After Finitude* aims to show that “not all speculation is metaphysical, and not every absolute is dogmatic—it is possible to envisage an *absolutizing* [*absolutoire*] thought that would not be *absolutist*.” (2006a, 47; 2008a, 34) What Meillassoux explicitly commits himself to is the critique of the “de-absolutizing implication”, according to which “if metaphysics is obsolete, so is the absolute.” (2006a, 47; 2008a, 34) While his *argument* against total deabsolutization is that it is ultimately a self-defeating intellectual project that cannot avoid recourse to an absolute principle, his basic *motivation* for attacking it is, as with Badiou, related to the theological implications of Heideggerian post-ontotheology. While the hermeneutical deconstruction of ontotheology will undermine previously established forms of rational theology, Meillassoux maintains that this deconstruction has simultaneously opened the door to purely *faith*-based and “irrational” versions of religiosity Meillassoux designates as *fideism*.

[...] by destroying metaphysics [...] one has inadvertently justified belief's claim to be the only means of access to the absolute. [...] the de-absolutization of thought boils down to the mobilization of a *fideist* argument; but a fideism that is "fundamental" rather than merely "historical" in nature—that is to say, a fideism that has become thought's defence of religiosity in general, rather than of a specific religion [...]. *The contemporary end of metaphysics is an end which, being sceptical, could only be a religious end of metaphysics.* (2006a, 63–64; 2008a, 45–46.)

As the two most prominent representatives of a fideist "aspiration towards an absoluteness which would no longer retain anything metaphysical, and which one is generally careful to designate by another name," Meillassoux (2006a, 66–67; 2008a, 48) cites the evocation of the "mystical" in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* as well as Heidegger's idea of a "theology without 'being'." As Wittgenstein and Heidegger are for him also the central thinkers of strong correlationism (2006a, 56–57; 2008a, 41–42), he concludes that "fideism is merely the *other name* for strong correlationism." This is one of the most problematic claims of Meillassoux's *After Finitude*. One cannot help wondering what really justifies the use of the term "absolute" in connection with these two approaches which, as Meillassoux himself points out, precisely avoid presenting divinity as an "absolute" in the traditional sense of something radically self-sufficient and self-subsistent. Moreover, the applicability of the term "fideism" to the late Heidegger's "theological" sketches, in which the postmetaphysical relation to the divinity or divinities is precisely not described in terms of faith, is highly questionable, as is Meillassoux's interpretation according to which Heidegger planned a theology that should contain "nothing philosophical." However, his general idea according to which conceiving God not as an entity but as a dimension of transcendence that resists objectification makes not only rational theology but also the rational atheology superfluous, seems more defensible. Wittgenstein and Heidegger indeed seem to render discussions concerning the existence and non-existence of the deity as well as its modalities (necessity, possibility, contingency) effectively meaningless.

It is important to see that while Meillassoux's underlying philosophical project is essentially directed against the "theological turn" in post-Heideggerian phenomenology and hermeneutics, it is not the program of Badiou's "contemporary atheism" that he is implementing, but something even more novel and unexpected, namely, the reintroduction of an explicitly philosophical notion of God as a being/entity, but one that is no longer the ontotheological *necessary* being but a merely *possible* and *contingent* one. Even though the definitive form of his relevant work remains unpublished, Meillassoux has already announced a forthcoming, completely reworked and extended version of his 1997 doctoral dissertation on "divine inexistence" (*L'inexistence divine*; 2006a, 67n1; 2008a, 132n15). On the basis of his dissertation (significant excerpts of its revised version have been published in an English translation in Graham Harman's study on Meillassoux; Harman 2011, 175–238), of an independently published article (Meillassoux 2006b; 2008b), and of certain hints present in his recently published reading of Mallarmé (2011a; 2012), we already have an inkling of the direction in which Meillassoux is taking us.¹⁶ By all accounts, it seems he is developing a notion of a God-entity that, as a matter of fact, does *not* exist, but in which it is nevertheless rationally legitimate to place one's faith since—in accordance with the principle of radical contingency—it *can be*, just as well as anything else. This divinity is not to be confused with the "God who may be" of Richard Kearney's (2001; 2002) deeply Heideggerian account; the latter is articulated in terms of pure potentiality (*dynamis*) as a divinity whose presence will not assume the form of the actuality of a substance, but consists in a mere futural indication or reference. Meillassoux's "God to come" is rather "possible" in the Deleuzian sense of *virtuality*, i.e., a possibility that is in no way foreshadowed or implied by what precedes it, but can only emerge *ex nihilo*, as an absolute *novelty*, compared by Meillassoux to the emergence of life from the world of matter and to the emergence of thought from the world of biological life (Harman 2011, 175–93).¹⁷ In a striking speculative retake of Kantian moral theology, Meillassoux emphasizes the ethical importance of a hope, without any supporting "evidence" but formally legitimized by speculative

materialism, of the emergence a radically novel divine entity that would redeem the traditional promises of the moral divinity—the enactment of a supreme good and of a supreme justice for the dead and the living—in a way that does not give rise to the immense traditional problem of theodicy, since the attributes of this entity no longer include absolute eternity and necessity (Meillassoux 2006b; 2008b; Harman 2011, 187–93, 207–21).

In conclusion, we may say that the contemporary philosophical overcoming of ontotheology, for which the divinity is an always already present (actual and substantial, absolute and necessary) entity, has left us with the fundamental figure of a non-present and purely *futural* god. The hermeneutical approach basically insisted on conceiving this god-to-come as a dimension of purely potential futurity, as an ultimate sense-granting purpose whose sole form of presence is that of an indication, hint, or trace pointing to a fundamental *absence*. However, the recent speculative developments of contemporary materialism have, rather surprisingly, resuscitated a genuinely messianic notion of a divine “advent,” of the possible coming-into-presence of the divine in a purely contingent and virtual, unmotivated and unpredictable, but nonetheless concrete and intratemporal, event, which nevertheless can bestow a purpose and dimension to the present situation in the form of an unfounded but rationally legitimate hope. It is to be expected that Meillassoux’s forthcoming works and their philosophical reception will determine whether the “strong correlationist” phase in philosophical approaches to theology is truly giving way to a new, non-ontotheological rationalism.

NOTES

¹ In his Zürich seminar, Heidegger (2005, 436–37) replies to a question concerning the identity of being and God: “Being [*Sein*] and god are not identical, and I would never attempt to think the essence [*Wesen*] of god through being. [...] Were I yet to write a theology, as I am sometimes tempted to do, the word ‘being’ should not occur in it. [...] I believe that being can never be thought as the ground and essence of god, but that the experience of god and its manifestness (insofar as it is encountered by the human being)

nonetheless takes place [*sich ereignet*] in the direction of being, which never means that being could be a possible predicate of god.” That Heidegger makes this statement in 1951 implies that he does not yet qualify the draft on the „ultimate god” in *Contributions to Philosophy* as a ‘theology’ in the strict sense.

² Among the most elaborate and thorough discussions of Heidegger’s notion of ontotheology are Thomson 2005 and 2010.

³ See, e.g., Heidegger 1983, 65–67; 1988a, 29; 1990, 17; 1992b, 14; 1993a, 206, 286, 307; 1995a, 42–44; 1997a, 37–38; 2006a, 60–61; 2008a, 168, 215, 227.

⁴ On this reading of Descartes, see, e.g., Heidegger 1989, 212–13; 1996, 429–30; 1998b, 112–71, 391–97, 410–13; 1998d, 325; 1999, 148–49; 2000b, 69–72, 82–83; 2002c, 66, 74–76, 81–84; 2003a, 87–88, 98–99; 2003b, 87, 98–100, 106–11; 2012, 166–67.

⁵ On the unity of transcendental apperception in Kant, see Heidegger 1988a, 125–29, 142–47; 1996, 458–63; 1997a, 177–182, 201–209; 1997c, 55–59; 1998a, 78–84; 1998c, 419–420; 1998d, 347–50; 2003a, 57–58.

⁶ On this reading of Nietzsche, see, e.g., Heidegger 1991a, 3–6; 1991b, 198–208; 1991c, 3–9, 150–251; 1991d, 147–96; 1998b, 1–4, 415–32, 585–94; 1998c, 1–22, 177–229, 231–361; 2000b, 77–86, 97–122; 2002c, 157–99; 2003a, 93–102; 2003b, 209–67.

⁷ On the “other onset,” see, e.g., Heidegger 1989, 4–6, 55, 57–60, 167–224; 1992a, 124–25, 184–90; 1994a, 108–09, 158–66; 1999, 3–5, 38, 40–42, 117–57; 2012, 6–8, 44, 46–48, 133–77.

⁸ For one of the most illuminating discussions of the Heideggerian “ultimate god,” see Greisch 2000; 2008.

⁹ I adopt here the rendering of *Seyn* as “beyng,” employed in the more recent Rojcewicz-Vallega-Neu translation of *Contributions* (instead of ‘be-ing’ in the Emad-Maly translation). The Early Modern English orthography “beyng” has the advantage of being functionally similar, as an archaic and obsolete spelling of “being,” to the German *Seyn* (still in use in the early 19th century).

¹⁰ In Verse VIII of *The Rhine*, Hölderlin (1951, 152) writes: “[...] if there is anything / that the celestial ones require [*bedürfen*], / it is heroes and humans / and other mortals. For since / the most blissful ones [*Seligsten*] feel nothing by themselves, / there must [...] be another who partakes / in the names of the gods and feels. / That is the one they need [*brauchen*] [...]” Heidegger (1980, 269) comments: “With this Verse VIII the poet’s thinking ascends one of the most protruding and solitary peaks of Western thinking, and that is to say, at the same time: of beyng [*Seyns*].”

¹¹ In his *Logics of Worlds* (2006), Badiou provocatively maintains that “[t]he critical machinery he [Kant] set up has enduringly poisoned philosophy [...]. Kant is the inventor of the disastrous theme of our ‘finitude’ [...]” (Badiou 2006b, 561; 2009, 535)

¹² This is the sense in which infinity is attributed to God by Thomas Aquinas (*Summa theologiae* Ia q7 a1).

¹³ Beistegui (2005, 45) aptly summarizes Badiou's philosophical project as an attempt to free thought from the double horizon of unicity (ontology) and transcendence (theology).

¹⁴ On the ambiguities inherent in Badiou's relationship to theology, see Clemens and Roffe 2008; Depoortere 2009; Phelps 2013. One of the only studies that also discusses Meillassoux's relationship to theology is Watkin 2011.

¹⁵ On Meillassoux's "argument from mortality," see my article "Transcendental Idealism and Strong Correlationism: Meillassoux and the End of Heideggerian Finitude," forthcoming in *Phenomenology and the Transcendental*, edited by Sara Heinämaa, Mirja Hartimo, and Timo Miettinen (London: Routledge).

¹⁶ For some of the few existing commentaries on Meillassoux's notion of the divine, see Harman 2011, 90–122; Johnston 2011; Watkin 2011, 132–67.

¹⁷ On the distinction between potentiality and virtuality, see Meillassoux 2006c; 2011b.

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