FROM BEING TO MAYBEING: ON MEILLASSOUX'S INTERPRETATION OF MALLARMÉ

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ABSTRACT: In *After Finitude* as well as in *Potentiality and Virtuality*, Meillassoux conceives chance in a mathematical way. In *The number and the Siren*, he argues that Mallarmé had a philosophical conception of chance, specifically a dialectical one. Here we explore Meillassoux's interpretation of Stéphane Mallarmé's poem *Un Coupe de dés*. What we consider to be crucial about that interpretation is the Mallarmean concept of Chance, which we think is the precursor to Meillassoux's concept of contingency. Additionally, we suggest that Meillassoux recuperates the Mallarmean "Perhaps", which may called "Maybeing", as that which replaces Being. We then explain what the concept of "Maybeing" is. Roughly speaking, it is a fusion of two English expressions: "may be" (modal verb) and "maybe" (adverb). Finally, we indicate how the concept of Maybeing can be used in order to solve the problem posed by the correlational circle, as well as some comments on Meillassoux's ideas about meaningless signs.

KEYWORDS: Speculative Realism; Quentin Meillassoux; Mallarmé.

1. INTRODUCTION

If this was a work whose goal was to critically judge Meillassoux's interpretation of Mallarmés poem *Un Coupe de Dés*, then it would be necessary to compare Meillassoux's interpretation with those of others, particularly with scholars of Mallarmé. We would then determine which aspects of Meillassoux's interpretation can be said to be correct and which are not, and we would also have to point out what original elements he brings to the table. There have been critical examinations of Meillassoux's interpretation of Mallarmé. For example,

on the issue of those aspects that Meillassoux's interpretation has missed, Wiedenfeld (2013) has pointed out that Meillassoux has not discussed the visual and graphic elements of the poem, such as the constellation that the words form at the end.

Without questioning the pertinence of these kinds of criticisms, here we wish to explore a different topic. There is much to be said about Meillassoux's interpretation of Mallarmé, but we will focus only on one aspect, albeit a fundamental one. We are referring to the way in which Meillassoux's innovative appropriation of Mallarmé is connected to the philosophical project that he has outlined in *After Finitude*. More specifically, we will see that Mallarmé's concept of Chance is the precursor to Meillassoux's concept of contingency. And we shall also see that this is so because the being of Chance, for Mallarmé, is something that according to Meillassoux has never been thought before. We suggest that this being of Chance, which is the Perhaps, and which is supposed to replace Being, can also be termed "Maybeing", a term whose meaning we will explain later.

2. CHANCE

Meillassoux (2012) claims that 707 is the secret Number which is alluded to several times in Mallarmé's poem. It is also the total number of words in the poem. However, Meillassoux says that what is important about the poem is not the fact that it has encrypted a special number. Hiding a number in a poem through a process of encryption is, according to Meillassoux, a rather puerile thing. He says that "a code, in itself, is basically something rather puerile, whatever its complexity", so that if there is indeed a secret mathematical code encrypted in Mallarmé's poem, however complex it may be, we would have to explain why Mallarmé committed "the childish trick of a decipherment into the splendor of his fractured verse." (Meillassoux, 2012: 10-12).

In fact, many poets who lived at the same time as Mallarmé encrypted secret numbers in their poems, and Meillassoux (2012: 125-126) emphasizes this point when he says that "Mallarmé is not Sar Pélardan, and his gesture does not participate in that kitsch esotericism so widespread at the end of the nineteenth century." Hence, "the code, in itself, has nothing singular about it: to count the words of his poem and to insert a charade that summarizes the ciphers, -anyone could do as much." (Meillassoux, 2012: 162-164).

Thus, hiding a secret number within the poem is not the main goal of the *Coup de dés*. The importance of the number 707 is not the fact that Mallarmé hid it within the poem. On the contrary, Meillassoux argues that what is important about this number is that it symbolizes the concept of Chance. An obvious question can be asked at this point: why does 707, instead of any other number, symbolize Chance?

Meillassoux's answer to this question is extensive. In fact, the majority of the pages of *The Number and the Siren* are dedicated to a detailed analysis of that problem. We will recount the answer here as briefly as possible. Meillassoux begins by arguing that the number 7 had a special meaning for Mallarmé. It is the number of stars in the constellation of the Septentrion, it is the seventh note of the musical scale, and most importantly, "for Mallarmé, 7 represents a medium term between the classical metric and pure chance" (Meillassoux, 2012: 45). It is also the number of words in the final sentence of the poem, which for Meillassoux is the "moral" of the story: "Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés." He argues that this last statement is the "key" to understanding the entire poem. Before that sentence, the last word of the poem is "*sacre*" (sacred), and Meillassoux says that this last word must have an important relation to the number 7.

So we know that the number 7 was important for Mallarmé due to several reasons, but this single digit cannot be, by itself, the secret number that Mallarmé encrypted in the poem. Because, according to Meillassoux (2012: 50) "he could not write the poem in 7 words". It seems to us that Meillassoux's claim on this point is somewhat questionable. In principle, Mallarmé *could have* written a poem with only 7 words. However, we will not purse this line of objection here.

After establishing the importance of the number 7, Meillassoux says that the total number of words in the poem must have some important relation to that number. Specifically, the total number of words must contain the number 7. This means that the final word of the poem, "*sacre*", "will contain 7 in a significant way" (Meillassoux, 2012: 51).

Then Meillassoux (2012: 51) says that the secret number must have three digits, no more, no less, since "there are, as a first approximation, many hundreds of words in the *Coup de dés*". And the number 7 must be part of that three-digit number. One possibility is that the number be 777. In that case, the word "*sacre*"

must be the 777th word of the poem. To see if that is the case, the total number of words in the poem should be counted. But Meillassoux says that 777 is only one possibility among others. If the three-digit secret number has other digits besides 7, then there are many other possible candidates. For example, it could be 756, or 874, or 376, and so on. Again, the simplest way to find out which of these possibilities coincides with the total number of words in the poem is simply to count those words. Yet, this would not explain the meaning of the other two digits in that number. What this means is that the other two digits must also be important for Mallarmé, they cannot be any arbitrary digits whatsoever.

What other digits were important for him? Apparently, the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 9 had no special meaning for Mallarmé. Meillassoux says that besides 7, "the only other immediately significant number in Mallarmé's poetics seems to be 0" (Meillassoux, 2012: 51). Why? Because "it would be an obvious symbol of Nothingness or of the night upon whose ground the Septentrion appears" (Meillassoux, 2012: 51). If these are the only two digits that must figure in the total number of words in the poem, then in principle there are four possibilities: 777, 700, 707 and 770.

But Meillassoux also says that even if the total number of words in the poem coincided with one of those possibilities, it could be simply a coincidence. In order to prove that it is not a coincidence, but a deliberate procedure instead, it would be necessary "to discover in the text of the *Coup de dés* an encrypted allusion to one of these four numbers" (Meillassoux, 2012: 52). He argues that this can be discovered in the central page of the poem. His argumentation is extensive, so we will be brief here in recapitulating it. He says that the central page of the poem is where the whirlpool is described, and which is symbolized by the number 0. By comparison, the number 0 must be the central digit of the secret number, just like the whirlpool that it symbolizes occupies the central page of the poem. This rules out the numbers 777 and 770, and it leaves us with only two possibilities: 700, or 707.

Harman (2015: 133) has well summarized why the number is 707 and not 700, because: "According to Meillassoux, the two occurrences of the phrase *comme si* ('as if') in the poem should both be read as meaning 'like 7', referring to the first and last digits of the number 7-7.", and after indicating the reasons for why the

middle digit is 0, he says "Both beginning and ending with 7, 707 'rhymes' the number 7, or acts (in a Hegelian fashion) as the 'negation of the negation of 7." (Harman, 2015: 134).

Here we will advance a series of remarks that seem to be implied by Meillassoux's interpretation of Mallarmé. The number 707, and not any other, symbolizes Chance because it is the product of a decision. What we mean by this is that, in principle, any other number can symbolize Chance, but Mallarmé opted for 707 due to his own personal reasons. His motives are many: the number of stars in the Septentrion, the seventh note on the musical scale, the Nothingness or night which is the background of the stars, etc. Someone else could choose a different number, for example 367, or 3532, or 145, etc. In that case, it seems to us that there is a series of Mallarmean requirements that the person in question would have to meet:

1) The number which symbolizes Chance, chosen by the author, should be equal to number of words in the poem. For example, if the number that the author chooses is 563, then the poem should have 563 words.

2) There should be at least one ambiguous term or word in the poem that makes the total count of words ambiguous. For example, a compound word which can be counted as a single word or two separate words. In our previous example, this could turn the total number of words into 564 instead of 563.

3) The poem should provide clues that indicate which number has been encrypted.

4) The secret number coded in the poem should be discoverable by chance alone, meaning that no amount of knowledge of the poet's background could permit one to infer which is the secret number that the poet chose.

Thus, any number whatsoever can symbolize Chance in a Mallarmean way, provided that certain requirements are met. Mallarmé chose 707 for his own personal and aesthetic reasons, but one can choose another number for a different set of personal and aesthetic reasons. But whatever number is chosen, the poem should be sufficiently ambiguous to turn the total number of words a matter of uncertainty. And this is precisely why 707 or any other number can symbolize Chance, since 707 in Mallarmé's poem can be 705 or 706, depending on how the compound words are counted. The key compound word of the poem

is, of course, *peut-être*, "perhaps". It is no accident that Mallarmé chose this word; on the contrary, it was a deliberate decision, since it emphasizes the idea that the encrypted number *may be* 707 instead of actually *being* 707. Therefore, the secret number in that poem is and is not 707, it is what it is and at the same time it is what it is not. *Perhaps* it is 707, *perhaps* it is not. This contradiction is what characterizes Chance, since the Mallarmean Chance is contradictory according to Meillassoux (2012: 30). Already for the young Mallarmé, Chance was not mathematical, but dialectical instead, since it:

> "is credited with a power of contradiction (it 'contains the Absurd') that allows it to be what it is, as well as what it is not - and thus to be 'infinite' in the dialectical (rather than mathematical) sense: to contain always already what is beyond its limit, and to absorb that which tends to oppose it." (Meillassoux, 2012: 30-31)

But its dialectic is different from that of Hegel's Absolute Spirit. While Hegel's Absolute Spirit contains "all in itself, including that which appears to deny it", Mallarmé's concept of Chance is "the process of Nothingness (understood as absence of Sense) including that which seems to be an exception to it." (Meillassoux, 2012: 30-31)

Yet, if Chance is understood as a lack of meaning, or Sense, then "that which seems to be an exception to it" must be meaningfulness, or Sense. This is why, in the example of a throw of dice, all of its results are meaningless. Even if that throw is made in the context of a game, and even if it turns out to be a winning throw, the result is still meaningless, though it could make the thrower think that "the course of things can seem oriented by an intentional and higher purpose" (Meillassoux, 2012: 30-31), while in reality there is no such intentional and higher purpose. It was just a lucky throw. Lucky indeed, but ultimately meaningless.

The work of a poet, says Meillassoux, is governed by the same meaninglessness that is capable of absorbing and incorporating into itself even the most apparently sublime meaning, since "sometimes, a stupefying sonnet of great beauty seems imbued with a destinal necessity, as if produced by a higher finality" (Meillassoux, 2012: 30-31), while in reality no such higher finality exists. The most bland poem, as well as the the most sublime one, are equally meaningless, since both of them are governed by the meaninglessness of Chance: "it is always chance that governs and presides over the birth of geniuses and their productions" (Meillassoux, 2012: 30-31).

Meillassoux (2012: 222) says that the *Coup de Dés* crystallizes with a task for future generations, "As that which makes no longer *being*, but the *perhaps*, the first task – the task to come – of thinkers and poets."

3. MAYBEING

If we asked, within the framework of Mallarmé's thought, or at least within the framework of Meillassoux's interpretation of it, "What is the Perhaps of an apple?" instead of asking "What is the being of an apple", the answer would have to be: "Perhaps the apple will become a tree, or Perhaps not." We do not know if a certain apple will become a tree or not. If it falls to the ground and the seeds begin to turn into a new plant, then it may become a tree. But if it is thrown at the ocean, it will not. The task of future thinkers and poets is to thematize the Perhaps of the apple, as well as the Perhaps in general, as that which replaces Being. Yet it seems that Mallarmé would not have been inclined to consider that perhaps an apple can become a squid or anything else whatsoever, and especially without any reason to account for such a radical change. He would have said that any change is meaningless, however radical that change may be, but he would not have conceded that such radical changes can take place in our Universe. Because if he conceded this, then he would have had to abandon his concept of Chance. Why?

Chance, Mallarmean or not, requires a certain degree of stability. Which is to say, Chance could not survive in a lawless, capricious universe. Let us be more precise. Chance is something that can be mathematized. If I throw a pair of dice, there are many equally possible results in principle. But if the dice turn into swans, I can no longer expect them to turn up a double six. This is why Meillassoux says the following in *After Finitude*:

> "Thus, it is important to notice that the very notion of chance is only conceivable on condition that there are unalterable physical laws. This is precisely what the example of the dice-throw shows: an aleatory sequence can only be generated on condition that the dice preserve their structure from one throw to the next, and that the laws allowing the throw to be carried out not change from one cast to the next. If from one throw to the next the dice imploded, or became flat or spherical, or if gravity ceased to operate and they flew off into the air, or on the contrary, were projected underground, etc., then there would be no aleatory sequence, and it would be impossible to establish a calculus of probabilities. Thus chance always

> presupposes some form of physical invariance – far from permitting us to think the contingency of physical laws, chance itself is nothing other than a certain type of physical law – one that is 'indeterministic'." (Meillassoux, 2008: 99)

The implications of Meillassoux's remarks are clear: if chance "is only conceivable on condition that there are unalterable physical laws", then Mallarmé's concept of Chance is only conceivable on that condition. Thus, if Meillassoux is right, then the Mallarmean Chance must presuppose unalterable physical laws. And if this is so, then Mallarmé himself could not have conceded that perhaps an apple can turn into a squid without any reason whatsoever, because if he did, he would have to abandon the notion of unalterable physical laws. And if he had to abandon such a notion, he would also have to abandon his concept of Chance.

The term "speculation" is sometimes used in a pejorative sense, especially when one speculates about what a person from another historical period would have said or done. The rejoinder is always something along these lines: "How do you know what X would have said or done? They could have said or done anything." Our reply is this: sure, X could have said or done anything, but not without consequences. In Mallarmé's case, if he had conceded that an entity can radically change for no reason whatsoever, this would have had profound consequences for his concept of Chance. Specifically, he would have had to abandon such a concept. Speculation in this sense is not a matter of advancing reckless claims that cannot be proved; on the contrary, it is a matter of showing that there were precise reasons for why X could not have said or done anything whatsoever without any sort of consequences. These consequences act as constrains for what X would have been willing to say or do; unless, of course, X was willing to embrace those consequences. And if they would have been willing to embrace those consequences, it must be explained *why*. Otherwise, there are no reasons for us to abandon our speculations about what X would have said or done, and what they would not have been willing to say or do.

For those who feel uneasy about the term "speculation", it can be translated into Popperian language: "speculation" here would mean the same thing as "conjecture". Of course, Popper held that formulating conjectures is not enough, they must be submitted to rigorous trials in order to see if they can survive the attempts to refute them. In other words, they must be falsifiable without being

falsified, at least for the time being. But if a conjecture is not falsifiable, this does not mean that it is worthless. For Popper, this only means that the conjecture is metaphysical. But Popper was never of the opinion that metaphysics is worthless. On the contrary, he believed that metaphysics was a fruitful enterprise, even for the stimulation of scientific activity. He liked to cited the metaphysics of the Ancient atomists and the impact their metaphysics had on the development of physics. Thus, from a Popperian point of view, unfalsifiable conjectures, or speculations, are not worthless, at least not all of them (Popper, 1989; 2002). And if pointing out the role that certain speculations had in the development of science seems too restricted, it is enough to recall the role that speculations can have in the production of, for example, science fiction, and literature in general.

Let us get back to Meillassoux's interpretation of Mallarmé. Chance must be understood as requiring unalterable physical laws. This is the point of departure for the elaboration of Meillassoux's concept of contingency. He explicitly states that "we must elaborate a concept of the *contingency* of laws that is fundamentally distinct from the concept of *chance*." (Meillassoux, 2008: 100).

The Mallarmean Chance requires unalterable physical laws, but if the task of thinkers and poets is to elaborate the Perhaps, then one may begin by abandoning the requirement just mentioned. This is precisely what Meillassoux has done. He has preserved the concept of the Mallarmean Perhaps without linking it to the concept of Chance, but to that of contingency instead. Let us pause for a moment in order to consider what this Perhaps implies. It is that which replaces Being. There are two colloquial terms in English which are synonyms of the term "perhaps": the terms "maybe" and "may be". For example: "Maybe John is dead"; and "It may be the case that John is dead". The expressions "maybe" and "may be" are grammatically different. The first one, "maybe", is an adverb. The second one, "may be", is a modal verb. Thus, it would be grammatically incorrect to say "May be John is dead", and it would also be incorrect to say "It maybe the case that John is dead". We will make use of this duality in order to establish the meaning of a concept that we will call "maybeing".

In order to understand what the Mallarmean Perhaps implies, it is convenient to translate it into those colloquial expressions, "maybe" and "may be", while also remembering that the Perhaps replaces Being. If this is so, then consider these

two questions:

1) What is the being of an apple?

2) What is the maybeing of an apple?

The first question has the general form "What is the being of X?", where "X" can be anything whatsoever. A more colloquial way in which that question can be phrased is: "What is X?", or "What is an apple?". In order to answer that question, we simply provide a definition: "An apple is a fruit with such and such characteristics", or "X is a P with the characteristics Q1… Qn".

However, if we ask "What is the maybeing of an apple?", matters are different. Here it is not clear what is being asked. So let us clarify it. Instead of asking "What is an apple", we ask: "What may an apple be?". Or, even more colloquially: "What can an apple be?"

The question may seem initially perplexing due to its apparent banality. An apple cannot be anything other than an apple, if it is to satisfy the Principle of Identity. But apples do change. An apple can cease to be an apple, for if this were not the case, then it would continue to exist forever. But when we say that it can cease to be an apple, what we mean is that it can turn into something different, although not anything whatsoever. For example, bluntly speaking, an apple can turn into a tree, precisely because it has seeds from which the tree can grow. The edible parts of the fruit may be eaten by birds, or they may rot and become part of the organic substrate of the soil. And there are reasons for why this may occur. But an apple cannot turn into a squid. Because there are no reasons that would permit this kind of change to occur. However, contrary to Mallarmé, within the framework of Meillassoux's philosophy an apple can certainly turn into a squid. It can turn into anything whatsoever, without reason. This hints at the maybeing of the apple, instead of its being. "What may an apple be?" Anything whatsoever. To state it less colloquially: "What is the maybeing of an apple?" It is absolute contingency. Even more so, the maybeing of every entity, thing, situation, process, etc., is the same: radical possibility without reason.

We have been speaking of Being here in a rather unspecified way, but we know that throughout history different philosophers have understood Being in different ways. Thus, the way in which Hegel conceives Being is not the same as Heidegger's. Instead of seeing this as a concern, we believe that it opens up novel possibilities instead. Consider what would happen to Hegel's philosophy if Being

is replaced by Maybeing. In *The Science of Logic*, first comes Being, then Nothing, and then Becoming. What would happen if Being is replaced by Maybeing in that logic? The answer is that Hegel's system would be severely altered from within. He initially opposes pure Being to pure Nothing, but Maybeing is not necessarily opposed to Nothing. It may be opposed to it, it may be not. And this means that Maybeing and Nothing do not necessarily constitute Becoming. They may, they may not. Perhaps they do, perhaps they do not. The reader can see where this line of reasoning leads to: the complete implosion of Hegelian dialectics as we know it, only to be replaced by a system that, for an orthodox Hegelian, would look quite abhorrent.

Now consider the case of Heidegger. Instead of viewing the Analytic of Dasein as a preliminary step for tackling the issue of Being, that Analytic would instead be a stepping stone for thinking about Maybeing. Furthermore, being-in-the-world would be replaced by maybeing-in-the-world. Thus, the very core of Dasein would be brutally altered by such a replacement. And think of what would happen if we replaced being-toward-death by maybeing-toward-death. The result of all of this would be similar to Hegel's case: we would witness the implosion of Heideggerian thought from within, only to be replaced by some repulsive, incomprehensible mockery which, nonetheless, might be just as profound as Heidegger's thought, if not even more so.

Lastly, to give a more accessible, but deeply disturbing example, that of Descartes. Recall his famous dictum: "I think, therefore I am" (*cogito ergo sum*). Consider what would happen if we replaced that phrase with this one "I think, therefore I may be". Why is this last formulation disturbing? Because if it is not necessary *to be* in order *to think*, then I cannot guarantee that *I am*, I can only entertain the possibility that I may be, though I may not be. In other words, the fact that I think would be insufficient to claim that I am; it would only give me grounds for claiming that I may be, although not necessarily, since if I may be, I may not be as well. And if I cannot prove that I am, solely on the fact that I think, then I cannot build the rest of the Cartesian system either. What I could do is build a very bizarre-looking philosophical building, where everything, including myself, may or may not be. Thankfully, this does have an upside to it. The evil genius may be, but he may not be. That the evil genius may be, is no longer a

sufficient reason for immersing myself in hyperbolic doubt. I may do this, but I may not. And both possibilities would be equally legitimate. Maybe I am being fooled by the evil genius, but maybe not.

This procedure of replacing Being with Maybeing holds for any philosopher that has ever had anything to say about Being. This includes Parmenides, Aristotle, Saint Aquinas, Spinoza, Lebniz, Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Deleuze, Badiou, among others. In each case, the replacement of Being by Maybeing would make their philosophies implode, no matter if these were systematic or anti-systematic. But those philosophies, systematic and anti-systematic alike, would be replaced by novel systems and anti-systems of philosophies. New books could be written, whose titles would be mockeries of already existing books: *Maybeing and Time*, instead of Heidegger's *Being and Time*; *Maybeing and Event*, instead of Badiou's *Being and Event*. Curiously, on this last point, Meillassoux has written an article on Badiou whose subtitle is *The Event and the Perhaps*, which, considering only titles, would be equivalent to *Maybeing and Event*.

4. CONSEQUENCES OF MAYBEING FOR THE REFUTATION OF CORRELATIONISM

Incidentally, it seems to us that the concept of Maybeing is what permits a decisive break with the correlational circle. This is so because the subject no longer attempts to think that which *is* outside of thought, but that which *may be* outside of thought. And something may be outside of thought precisely because it may be something radically different, which is to say: a certain object is currently relative to thought, but it may radically change in such a way that it is no longer relative to thought. The key word here is "may", because the object *may* radically change, without actually *doing so*. The transformation, or change, that we are speaking about here is not one of radical physical transformation. We are not talking about, for example, a billiard ball that suddenly changes into a bird for no reason whatsoever. Here we are talking about a billiard ball that suddenly changes from being relative to thought to not being relative to thought. It is still a billiard ball. But the radical change that has taken place concerns the billiard ball's relation to thought. Initially, it is dependent on thought, but then it changes in such a way that it is no longer dependent on thought. No physical change has occurred.

To express this idea in Meillassoux's terms: in order to exit the correlational circle, I cannot think of something which is dependent on thought, and I cannot think of something which is independent of thought either. But I can think of something which *may be* independent of thought, even if it *is* not. In the first case, I am thinking of something dependent of thought, therefore I remain in the correlational circle. In the second case, I attempt to think about something independent of thought, but as soon as I attempt to do this, that "something" is being thought by me, therefore I remain in the correlational circle. Both cases are dependent on the notion of Being. But in the third case, I think about something that *may* be independent of thought, even if it actually *isn't*. This third case is no longer dependent on the notion of Being, but that of Maybeing. I can think of something that, *perhaps* can be independent of thought. No contradiction arises here, and thus the correlational circle is broken. The contradiction can only arise if I am employing the notion of Being, but this is not the case when I employ the notion of Maybeing. In other words, the contradiction can only arise if I claim that a thing *is* independent of thought, but no contradiction arises if I claim that a thing *may* be independent of thought. In this last case, I am not claiming that something *is* independent of thought, only that it *may be* so, without actually *being* so.

5. MEANINGLESS SIGNS

How does all of this relate to what we said in the previous chapter about non-Euclidean geometries, Hilbert's formalism, axiomatic systems, and syntactic systems? The answer to this question resides in Meillassoux's Berlin lecture of 2012, where he discusses the ontology of the meaningless sign. Although he addresses several different topics in that lecture, Meillassoux's fundamental thesis regarding formal languages is that, far from having no ontology whatsoever, all of them have an ontology. His line of argumentation begins by considering formal languages in general, including both mathematics and logic. This approach is different from *After Finitude*, not because it contradicts it, but because it elaborates it further. In *After Finitude*, Meillassoux was almost exclusively concerned with mathematics, whereas in his Berlin lecture, he gives attention to logic as well. He has subsumed both mathematics and logic under the scope of formal languages in general.

After stating that he will be considering formal languages in general, Meillassoux establishes a distinction between natural languages and formal languages. This distinction is based on the role that meaningless signs have in them. In natural languages, he says, meaningless signs occur at the level of morphology, that is, at the level of letters and syllables, which constitute words. We may say, for example, that the letter "T" is a meaningless sign. It is simply a visual mark or a sound that has no meaning in itself, but it is used in combination with other letters, as if they were building blocks, in order to formulate words. In general, words have a meaning, but Meillassoux notes that even in natural languages one can formulate meaningless words. The example he cites is Mallarmé's term "ptyx", a word which does not mean anything, but which plays an artistic role in his work.

By contrast, in formal languages, Meillassoux says, meaningless signs occur at the level of syntax. In these languages, meaningless signs have a structural and fundamental role. The fact that Meillassoux is fully aware of the importance of syntax in formal languages is what justifies what we said in the previous chapter about syntactic systems. He is fully aware that these systems are composed of meaningless signs. And his constant references to mathematical formalism, specifically to Hilbert's mathematical formalism, show that he is well aware that mathematical Platonism had been seriously questioned at the beginning of the 20th Century, if not before. Thus, when Meillassoux discusses the importance of mathematics in *After Finitude* and in other texts, one must bear in mind that he is not a "naive Platonist" or anything of that sort. On the contrary, he knows that mathematical Platonism had been seriously called into question by the proponents of mathematical formalism. He acknowledges this in his Berlin lecture, and he states that his goal is, so to speak, to see if one can "move beyond" formalism. Specifically, he states that mathematical formalism, contrary to what Hilbert and other proponents claimed, does indeed have an ontology, although not a Platonic one. It is not an ontology of numbers which exist independently in another world, but an ontology of meaningless signs which can be produced in this world.

Meillassoux says that what is unique and distinctive about formal languages is that they have a minimal condition, which is the production of meaningless

signs. We gave some examples of this in the previous chapter, when we discussed the clover-at-hashtag system. Meillassoux offers other examples, like "+++++++++". This succession of addition symbols is meaningless. And not only that, it is even outside mathematics and logic. What we mean by this is that this succession of addition symbols would be a syntactic error in mathematics and in logic. In mathematics, one does not write "2 +++++++++ 2 = 4", but "2 + 2 = 4" instead. Likewise, in logic, an expression such as "+++++++++" has no place. So why does Meillassoux offer this example? Because, even though it would be incorrect to use it in mathematics and in logic, one can invent a new syntactic system where "+++++++++" is a well-formed formula, just like one can invent a new syntactic system, such as the clover-at-hashtag system, where "🍀#" is a meaningless, well-formed formula.

So far, what has been said is that one can produce meaningless signs, and then use these meaningless signs as the building blocks of a syntactic system. By introducing certain restrictions, one can turn a syntactic system into a formal language, such as logic or mathematics. At this point, Meillassoux says that the ability to produce meaningless signs can be derived from the Principle of Factiality, which was introduced in *After Finitude*. There is a fundamental relation or "essential link", he says, between meaningless signs and contingency, understanding the term "contingency" in the way in which it was defined in *After Finitude*.

In order to understand this fundamental relation between meaningless signs and absolute contingency, it will be convenient to see what else Meillassoux has to say about meaningless signs. In his discussion, he uses the distinction, widely discussed in linguistics and in philosophy of language, between types and tokens. A token is the occurrence of a type. What this means is that an expression such as "+++++++++" is the repeated occurrence of a single type, the meaningless sign "+". To use a metaphor, a type is like a Platonic Idea, and a token is like an "incarnation" of that Idea, something that "participates" in that Idea. But this metaphor is not entirely adequate, because Platonic Ideas supposedly inhabit another world, or another "realm", whereas types are not floating around in some other world or realm; instead they are part of this world. And they are produced, by convention, when it is consented that a certain meaningless visual mark or

sound may be reproduced or repeated. When this is conceded, that visual mark or sound ceases to be just some arbitrary image or sound, and becomes instead a meaningless sign which bears a type/token distinction. That meaningless sign, *qua* visual mark or sound, is a token, but since we have agreed that we may repeat it or reproduce it, it is also a type; or more precisely, it is at the same time a token and an occurrence of a type.

What does this have to do with the fundamental relation between meaningless signs and absolute contingency? To state it briefly, for Meillassoux there is a way of perceiving a meaningless sign which is at the same time the perception of absolute contingency. It is not immediately clear, however, what the preceding statement means. So let us clarify it. Meillassoux says that there are two ways in which a meaningless sign can be perceived. Before explaining what these two ways are, let us focus for a moment on something else that Meillassoux says about these two ways of perceiving: he says that one can switch between them. In order to understand this, we will use as an example what Kuhn (1970) says about visual figures such as the duck-rabbit.

When I look at the image of the duck-rabbit, I can perceive it as a duck, or as a rabbit. In other words, I can switch between the perception of one of the animals and the other. In analogous fashion, when I see a meaningless sign marked on a piece of paper, I can perceive it as a visual mark. But I can also perceive it as an occurrence of a type. In analogous fashion, when I look at any entity that can be visually perceived, such as an apple, I can look at it in two ways: as a contingent thing, or as "a vehicle for contingency". In other words, the duck-rabbit is comparable to the apple-contingency. Or, to state it more generally, the duck-rabbit is comparable to the entity-contingency. I can switch between my perception of the duck and the perception of the rabbit in the duck-rabbit image. Likewise, I can switch between my perception of an entity and my perception of contingency in the entity-contingency compound, or the X-contingency compound, where X can be anything whatsoever: an entity, situation, fact, process, physical law, etc.

Unlike the duck-rabbit image, the duality in the X-contingency compound cannot be visually perceived. I cannot "see" contingency. Nor can I hear it, taste it, smell it or touch it. It is not something that I can perceive through one of my

five senses. In the apple-contingency compound, I can perceive the apple with all of my senses: I can see its color, I can hear the sound that it makes when it falls to the ground, I can perceive its aroma, I can taste its sweetness, and I can feel its smooth, solid surface. None of this can be done with contingency. The only way in which I can "perceive" contingency is through thought.

Of course, this idea of "perceiving" contingency is polemic. In *After Finitude*, Meillassoux (2008: 82-83) claims that contingency can be accessed by way of "intellectual intuition". Kant had dismissed "intellectual intuition" in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Brassier (2007) argued extensively that this concept is problematic for Meillassoux's philosophy, and that it should be abandoned. We agree with Brassier that Meillassoux attempts to rehabilitate intellectual intuition in a non-Kantian way. So, for example, in his interview with Florian Hecker, one of the definitions of rationality that he advances is this one: "rationality is just the capacity to be directly connected to a hyperchaos which has absolutely no limits" (Meillassoux & Hecker, fecha: 4). This definition of rationality could well be a re-definition of "intellectual intuition". Yet, this re-definition does not convince us. Unless the concept of intellectual intuition is fleshed out even further, we agree with Kant and with Brassier on this point: humans do not have such a faculty. But we will leave this aside here. Let us continue with Meillassoux's reflections on meaningless signs.

He says that a meaningless sign is arbitrary. This means that anything can be used to replace it. For example, in the clover-at-hashtag system, there is no reason to use a clover sign instead of a diamond sign or any other meaningless sign. We can replace the clover sign with a diamond sign, and this will not alter the syntax of the system in any way. Meillassoux distinguishes the arbitrariness of the meaningless sign from the Saussurian concept of arbitrariness, which is a relation between the signifier and the signified. What the Saussurian concept of arbitrainess means is that any signifier can be used for the same signified, and that it is not necessary that a certain signifier be associated with a certain signified. For example, if the signified is "the fruit of an apple tree", then it is not necessary that we use the signifier "apple" for that, it is only arbitrary. For if this were not the case, then the signifiers "*pomme*" and "*manzana*", which are the French and Spanish terms for "apple", could not be signifiers of the signified in

question. In contrast to the Saussurian concept of arbitrariness, the Meillassouxian concept of arbitrariness does not pertain to the relation between signifier and signified, but to a relation that is exclusive to signifiers. In other words, it is a relation between a meaningless sign and another meaningless sign. Any sensible mark, says Meillassoux, can fulfill the role of a meaningless sign, the syntactic role it has in a formal language. As an example, he says that the meaningless signs of formal set theory can be replaced by seashells.

In our example of the clover-at-hashtag system, the 🍀 sign could be replaced by a rock, the # symbol by a seashell, and the @ symbol by a shoe. Recall that, according to the production rules of that system, from the formula ## we can obtain 🍀. By making the replacements mentioned before, this means that if we place two rocks together, then we can place a seashell in the next step, but not a rock or a shoe. Why? Because those are the production rules that we had invented for that syntactic system. Any other rules could have been invented instead, for example, by stating that from ## we obtain @ instead of 🍀. That these meaningless signs can be replaced by any other sensible marks, such as rocks, seashells and shoes, implies that they are arbitrary in the Meillassouxian, and not the Saussurian sense. And this is so because they have no meaning whatsoever. Which is to say, they have no semantic role, only a syntactic one.

In sum, Meillassoux says that formal languages, understood as syntactic relations of meaningless signs, have an ontology. They have no Being in any of the traditional acceptances of this term, such as Aristotle's, Hegel's or Heidegger's. What they have, instead, is speculative contingency, which is their sole eternal property. Here is where, we believe, the fusion between the meaninglessness of syntactic systems and the Mallarmean Perhaps takes place. Recall that the Perhaps was to replace Being. Meaningless signs have no Being, but a Perhaps instead. They have a Maybeing instead of a Being. Which means that they are not only meaningless, but also absolutely arbitrary. And when we say "absolutely arbitrary", this is meant literally. The arbitrariness of the meaningless sign is absolute. A meaningless sign such as 🍀 does not have a Being, but a Maybeing, since it May-Be a rock instead, or a seashell, or anything else. Thus, we emphasize the distinction between the phrase "to be" and this other, awkward phrase: "to may be".

Formalism, understood as the philosophy that upholds that mathematics is nothing but the manipulation of meaningless signs, is taken up by Meillassoux and endowed with a Mallarmean ontology, where the fundamental ontological property of meaningless signs is not Being, but Maybeing instead. A meaningless sign may *be*, but not necessarily. And it may be what it is now and what is has been up until now, but not necessarily, since it may be something different.

For Meillassoux it is not the case that the Universe is, in the last instance, mathematical. On the contrary, mathematics is, in a certain way, "derivative", because what the Universe is, in the last instance, is radical contingency. Mathematics *qua* mathematics depends on this radical contingency, and not the other way around. For if it was the other way around, then Meillassoux's philosophy would be nearly identical to Max Tegmark's (2008) Mathematical Universe Hypothesis, and this is not the case. Only absolute contingency is necessary, eternal and fundamental; everything else, including mathematics, is contingent, perishable and derivative. To state it poetically: numbers can be destroyed by hyper-Chaos. Algebraic structures can also be destroyed by it. It can create a Platonic realm of Ideas, and it can also create Tegmark's Mathematical Universe. But it can also destroy them, without reason. Yet this way of speaking is poetical. What we are really talking about when speaking of hyper-Chaos is radical contingency.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The whole idea of "perceiving contingency", as if there was such a thing as "intellectual intuition" is highly questionable, as are other aspects of Meillassoux's philosophy. For example, his claim that mathematical formalism has an ontology sounds more like a work in progress than something which has been definitely proven. However, despite whatever major differences we have with Meillassoux's work, we still think it is one the most perplexing and entertaining philosophies of the twenty-first century.

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