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The Speculative Family, or: Critique of the Critical Critique of Critique¹

“He’s into science. But he has lost his way.” (Bloc Party, *V.A.L.I.S.*)

Introduction: A Founding Father and His View of the World (after Kant)

Kant was born, thought, and died. It seems that not much has changed since then, since he walked the earth. Unaltered, each new day the sun rises. And afterwards it again sets. Each and every day it is the same procedure. The world, after Kant: still business as usual. But where does this certainty come from that the sun will unalterably rise again on each new day? As most readers will know, this question might also be formulated in a more technical manner as follows: How can one, starting from the experiences of seemingly stable relations between cause and effect (the day begins, the sun rises) infer a certain conviction that the content of these already made experiences (relations between cause and effect) can be generalized to a legitimate, stable, and lawful relation? And this is ultimately to say: How can one, starting from experiences of past concatenations of cause and effect, derive future concatenations? These questions formulate an epistemological problem that became famous in the history of phi-

¹ This title of the present article is motivated by a diagnosis of the contemporary present that was formulated by Alain Badiou. The diagnosis runs as follows: We are today in a comparable situation like Marx was in the 1840s (we thus have to prove anew the validity of the hypothesis of emancipation). Cf. Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, London / New York 2010: Verso, pp. 66–67, 258–259. I share this diagnostic stance and its implications. Badiou had already stated something along these very lines in his 1985 *Peut-on penser la politique?*, where he claimed that it is precisely the worldwide crisis of Marxism which necessitates the rewriting of the Communist Manifesto. If Badiou’s diagnosis is correct, then it would not only imply that the Communist Manifesto, but also the Theses on Feuerbach, “The Holy Family”, would need to be redone. This insight motivates the present article. Obviously, I can here maximally present certain outlines of such an endeavour. My first much shorter reflections in this direction were also presented in: Frank Ruda, *Die spekulative Familie*, in: *Texte zur Kunst*, June 2012, Vol. 86, pp. 172–176.

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osophy under the name “the problem of induction”² and was formulated by the pre-Kantian philosopher David Hume.

It may come as no surprise that today this question is rarely recalled, rarely taken up as a true and pressing question, notwithstanding if one likes to call oneself a philosopher or not. This is not because it has been proven at some point that Hume and his problems belong in the museum of history (although there are some who seem to believe this). Rather it is because, as Adorno once remarked, the history of philosophy is full of problems that have been forgotten.³ We who have been born after Kant, think (if we think) in the same way Kant did that *the* access to *the* concatenations of cause and effect and to the absolute lawfulness and regularity of nature, that is to say: that cognition of how things are in themselves, in their absolute nature, independent from us – cannot be obtained. At least it seems that such an alleged and all-relativizing dis-absolutization of thought, i.e. an exiling of the absolute from the realm of thought, is what came into the world with Kant. And at least this is one of the most fundamental claims of a more or less new philosophical movement or group (which wants to be neither the former nor the latter) that became a talking point some time ago:

² If one shares its premises (that is to say, how to get from experience to the inference of stable laws) this is truly a problem. I therefore agree with Quentin Meillassoux – the philosopher I will primarily be dealing with in the present article – that one cannot as easily do away with it as certain thinkers like Karl R. Popper or in a different manner even Nelson Goodman contended. Cf. David Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*, Oxford 1888: Clarendon Press, pp. 89, 180; David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principle of Morals*, Oxford 1975: Clarendon Press; Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, & Forecast*, Cambridge 1955: Harvard University Press, pp. 72–75; Karl R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, New York 1959: Basic Books, pp. 253–254, 315. Why is that? Because: not only any particular sunrise (any particular experience) becomes problematic, but what is put in the spotlight is the very relation from any particular (experiential) case to any future generalization (in terms of law). The problem is thus fundamentally related to the legitimacy of inductively developing any sort of *lawfulness* of (and within) appearances.

³ Adorno’s precise diagnosis was that the whole history of philosophy is in some sense the history of forgetting problems, questions, or ideas that once seemed pressing and agitating and then lost significance, only to re-appear later within the same history in a renewed context and guise. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics. Concepts and Problems (1965)*, Stanford 2001: Stanford University Press pp. 65ff.

so-called speculative realism.⁴ I will here mainly deal with one of its founding fathers. Let us call him the speculative realist.⁵

The speculative realist thinks that some things changed – to be more precise: all things in themselves become-other for thought – with Kant. And this change was not a change for the better. As *peculiar* and at the same time refreshing such a philosophical label may appear today, since it is hard to imagine an increase in the counter-current (realism and furthermore a speculative one) in times of an omnipresent hegemony of analytic philosophy, *so peculiar* and discordant are also the different projects of its proponents regarding what this label might mean.⁶ But at least with some vulgarization or generalization two gestures can

⁴ The “speculative realism“ label dates back to a conference which was held in 2007 at Goldsmith College in London. Its proponents, well known to the reader, were primarily: Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Graham Harman, and Iain Hamilton Grant. For an overview, see also: *The Speculative Turn. Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. by Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, Melbourne 2011: re-press. Hereinafter cited as ST. The debate on whether there is a group under this name or not is mentioned in: Graham Harman, *On the Undermining of Objects: Grant, Bruno and Radical Philosophy*, in: ST, pp. 21-40. Hereinafter cited as GHO.

⁵ I mainly refer to what Quentin Meillassoux, one of if not the founding father thereof, develops in his impressive: *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, London / New York 2008: Continuum.

⁶ A short – and as I reckon rather unfair – remark regarding Harman and Grant: Harman seeks to put objects (again) into the centre of a renewed foundation of ontology. Why? Because that which has been forgotten within occidental thought – more or less throughout its history – is the object, the object as an actant. Therefore he seems to agree with Heidegger: we, the Westerners, forgot something and we even forgot that we forgot. And, that which is the centre of what we forgot is the object(s). If Harman’s renewal of ontology – the idea he also seems to share with Grant – consists in treating “the inanimate world as a philosophical protagonist” (GHO, 25) and in defending the claim that “[t]he object is what is autonomous but not entirely autonomous, since it exists in permanent tension with all those realities that are meant to replace it completely” (GHO, 39), this seems to me to be quite a problematic move. To make a long story short: It seems that Harman asserts that there is an object of being but this very object (maybe even objects) does not embody being. It is not an objective object, not objective objects, he is referring to. Rather he seems to assert that there is something at what being itself aims at, an “object” (of desire) of being itself (like an *object a* of being causing being to be what it is). This is why these objects act for him in one way or another. And they are at the same time (being) covered up, repressed, etc. Being itself has its own *object a* and this is what Harman refers to under the category of “object”. As surprising as this might sound, my reservation concerns this (somehow purely) rhetorical twist from the “being of the object” to the “object(s) of being”. For even if this does not imply that “being” and “object(s)” are equated (which would consequentially simply render the concept of the “object” meaningless), it implies that there

be discerned in all of them. On one hand, they claim in a nearly Heideggerian manner that amongst other things, or first and foremost with Kant, modern thought enters into oblivion. Modern (philosophical) thought forgets precisely what was still present within it with Descartes, Locke, as well as Hume. On the other hand, this oblivion is elucidated in a way that would have given the creeps to a huge fraction of philosophers – from Heidegger up to Critical theory, from Kant to the Frankfurt School. For what this forgetting forgets is the discourse of science, or to be more precise: that science thinks.

1. With Kant all Things Come Under the Yoke of Correlation

If Descartes was still able to distinguish between the primary and secondary properties of an object – between the properties the things have in themselves and independent from us, and those that they have when and because they appear to us and that are hence properties that correlate with the being-observed by an observer – with, after, and because of Kant thought is afflicted by an

is something like “a cause” or even “a truth of being” that lies in its “object(s)”. Simply put: There is an *objective truth* of (the) being (of everything that is) since being is what it is because of its object(s). From this simple (and I contend, rather rhetorical) reversal, one can easily start reflecting on the “objective sciences” as bearer of the truth of “being”. As to what I can see with regard to this enterprise, I think that its basic premises are very close to being a mere sophism. I think this can be best grasped in: Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, Illinois 2002: Open Court Publishing. Grant proposes some sort of Schellingian renewal of an Aristotelian metaphysics of (natural) force(s), turning its focus to the “powers *always at work*, always intrinsic to “any “formative process”. [Cf. Iain Hamilton Grant, *Mining Conditions: A Response to Harman*, in: ST, pp. 41–46; his neo-vitalism comes out even more clearly in: Iain Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling*, London 2006: Continuum.] He argues for a primordial, pre-individual constancy of production. (*Mining Conditions*, p. 45) One gets the same thing that one gets with Harman only that the focus is not even on the “object(s) of being” but on the formation – which seen in the clear light of day is pretty much the same thing. For Grant asserts that that which produces and its products can no longer be distinguished. As both insist that their take on what the sciences do is utterly materialist (against any idealist forgetting of the object or of the productive powers at work), I agree here with Adrian Johnston that “conceding the form of an interminable and unwinnable epistemological debate is itself idealist.” (Adrian Johnston, *Hume’s Revenge. À Dieux Meillassoux*, in: ST, p. 112; hereinafter cited as AJHR) I consider both projects in Badiouian terms to be but – perhaps rigorous and systematic – examples of sophistry. The first is an objective, the latter a vitalist metaphysics. Rendered differently, I have trouble seeing – accepting the coordinates of their own arguments – why what both end up with is not precisely what they would call idealism.

absolutization of the secondary qualities of the object. Hand in hand with this goes a *disabsolutization of thought* since it no longer has access to the primary qualities. The things, the world, reality, and nature are only there with and after Kant for us, as a correlate to our existence. Paradigmatically, one can recognize this in the Kantian exiling of the thing in itself from the realm of the knowable and cognizable. With and after Kant modern thought thinks that the distinction between our mind-dependent and concept-dependent access to reality, on one hand, and reality as it is as such, on the other, is a difference within the mind, a difference within the concept. Such a (post-)Kantian position is attacked by speculative realism with the label “correlationalism”, whose founding manoeuvre can be well described in quite simple terms: it takes the concept of difference (for example, between concept and thing) to be a (mere) conceptual difference.⁷ Correlationalism is clever, even reflected ignorance (of things as they are in themselves).⁸ Its paradigm is what Kant called “critique”. It limits things to their being-thought, it limits thought to being itself and thereby absolutizes limitation (via correlation). Correlationalism is thus an oblivious *metaphysics of (hypostatized) finitude*.

⁷ To my mind, this argument was presented in a fascinating manner by one of the most innovative and rigorous thinkers somehow associated with the label of “speculative realism”: Ray Brassier. Cf. His *Concepts and Objects*, in: ST, pp. 57–64. Yet, one has to note here, against the reiterated attack of some speculative realists on Hegel, that this argument is in its entirety a Hegelian one. When Hegel introduces the notion of difference, he is very explicit what one gets with it. It is not only another notion but it is a notion that is, one might say, self-applicative. When one reaches the concept of “difference” what one also gets is the idea that there is even a difference to the conceptual that becomes thinkable (this is the self-application of the concept of difference onto the conceptual realm as such; it introduces a difference). Thus it is not just another concept or notion, but a concept which entails more than just what is conceptual, i.e. the difference to the concept is implied in the concept of difference.

⁸ At the same time what should be clear – as is certainly known to readers of Meillassoux’s work – is that in dis-absolutizing the capacity of thought, correlationalism absolutizes the correlation (even more in a certain sense even its contingency). The most straightforward account of this can be found in: Quentin Meillassoux, *Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign* (Workshop Paper, Berlin 2012, unpublished; hereinafter cited as QMIRR). Reconstructing correlationalism in this manner somehow is part of overcoming correlationalism from within (for Meillassoux thinks this is the only option). That this is not an uncontroversial claim can be seen in Ray Brassier, *Concepts and Objects*, pp. 59–65.

2. Science thinks⁹

If Descartes – effectively *the* philosopher of the scientific Copernican turn – was still able, with his distinction between primary and secondary qualities of objects, to allocate mathematics a constitutive role within (ontology but also) epistemology, since it was capable of recognizing and presenting the properties of the things in themselves, this is precisely what is denied with and after Kant. It is as if with and after Kant the primary qualities of things, of the world, and so on, are simply forgotten, repressed. One might say: With and after Kant the being of objects – *das Ding* – is forgotten and we are simply dealing with objects (of and in our world). This is a specific form of oblivion with regard to the ontological difference. The consequence of this is: science presents knowledge (of the things or us) for us. But it is also by this very move that, according to the speculative realist, certain scientific statements and their true content become consequentially incomprehensible for any correlationalist. If, for example, science talks about the existence of the world before the origin of consciousness, the correlationalist is unable to understand these “ancestral” (Meillassoux) statements in the way that they should be understood. He does not interpret them as what they are: statements about the absence of correlation or of any sort of givenness (for example, of objects for a consciousness) in general, but he rather interprets them as statements about the *absence of the correlation in correlation* with consciousness. The correlationalist is only able to understand claims that refer to something before the emergence of consciousness and thus to the *absence of consciousness* only as claims about the *absence for consciousness*.¹⁰ Correlationalism implies in this sense always a misconception of the very

⁹ I owe this adorable and firmly Anti-Heideggerian formula to an unpublished text by Rado Riha.

¹⁰ As consistent and crucial as this criticism of (post-)critical thought concerning science is or at least might appear to be, that much does it come with the danger of a quite problematic Stalinist twist: Against the wrong ideological usurpation of science(s) one opposes a philosophically (i.e. ideologically) ensured, that is to say, materialist position. The latter implies: The sciences or scientists themselves have to be educated in order to take the right ideological position. Not surprisingly, the educator is he who endorses the correct philosophical position. In a peculiar combination two claims are thus put forth at the same time: one needs to take the sciences seriously; the sciences/scientists need to be educated by he who knows how to educate them to understand that they need to neglect any wrong ideological utilization. Ed Pluth also touches upon some aspects of this in his contribution to this volume.

scientificity of science because it ultimately implies a (sophistically versed) version of a *metaphysics of presence* (of consciousness).

3. Speculative Revolution: Absolutizing Contingency

The speculative realist knows that after Kant one cannot simply return to a state before the fall (i.e. the Kantian Copernican Revolution). The taking of positions cannot simply be: Hume or Kant, not even: Descartes or Kant. This is why he executes a daring *speculative manoeuvre* that is supposed to enable him on one hand to avoid resolving the difference of concept and thing in the concept of difference and, on the other hand, with this very move he seeks to comprehend scientific statements as statements about the subject-independent *real being* of things.¹¹ Within this he attempts to turn Hume's epistemological misery into an ontological virtue.¹² This is supposed to mean that the answer to Hume is precisely what appeared to be his problem: One can think the nature, the essence, the qualities of the things in themselves, but these qualities have a very peculiar characteristic. The speculative realist opts against all forms of correlationalism for an (ontological) *absolutization of the primary qualities*¹³ and through their particularity seeks to defend a (renewed speculative realist) *absolutization of thought*. The speculative realist contends against Kant that the absolute can be thought, but at the same time contends also against Descartes that the peculiar

¹¹ One would have to demonstrate in greater detail how at least Meillassoux, with his own elaboration of the (Badiouian) thesis that it is precisely mathematics that can overcome the very form of a subject-dependent discourse and is hence able to grasp and formalize the absolute outside of any discourse, is ultimately led to claim that there is "something" within this absolute, within the things in themselves, that correlates with the universal (and subject-independent) discourse of mathematics. To put this differently: *the speculative realist* Meillassoux replaces the *subject-object correlation* with a *mathematics-things-in-themselves correlation* which finally implies (at least up to a certain and quite crucial degree) the discursive nature of nature itself. As much as I am unconvinced by the correlationalism that Meillassoux criticizes, that much does his version of speculative-realist correlationalism not convince me. I owe this interpretation of Meillassoux's work to a brilliant article by Alenka Zupančič, *Realism in Psychoanalysis* (unpublished typescript). This criticism also resonates in a formula introduced by Adrian Johnston: "What is mathematically conceivable is absolutely possible." (AJHR, 134)

¹² For this, see: AJHR and Peter Hallward, *Anything is Possible. A Reading of Quentin Meillassoux's After Finitude*, in: ST, pp. 130–141. Hereinafter cited as PWAP.

¹³ Meillassoux thus contends that the very "being of every thing is its contingency". (QMIRR) Being qua being hence becomes "*peut-être*". See also: Quentin Meillassoux, *Speculative Realism*, in: *Collapse*, Vol. 3., 2007, p. 393.

nature of it necessitates not thinking that which is but that which can be. What is absolute and has to be as *the* primary quality of all things is that they can be other than they are. This Otherness of all things, that is to say: contingency becomes the primary quality of everything that there is. *Contingency is primary, what is primary is contingent.*

The primary quality is subject-independent because things are the way they are – for example, they appear to us in the way they appear to us – but they could be different as there is no reason why they are the way they are. Thus, the way we experience things only tells us one thing about things: that we know nothing about how things really are. Simply put: what has to be thought as being absolute is that everything can be *other*, different than it is. Here one can see how the ontologizing *inversion of Hume*¹⁴ concerns the status of each and every law (thinkable). One can render this not only as an inversion of Hume but also: 1. As an *inversion of Descartes*: Since Descartes famously doubted everything that deceived him in order to gain absolute certainty. Might one not also be quite tempted to suggest that what this speculative realist manoeuvre comes down to is that the absolute character of all things is (experiential) deception? That is to say: does this not amount to claiming that things can deceive us because the only thing we know for sure is that for no reason whatsoever everything can be other than it is and this very insight is precisely the insight into the *in itself* of the thing as such? Is not contingency an ontological name for an ontologized positivization of the very Cartesian idea of experiential deception? 2. As an *inversion of Kant*: Since Kant, according to the speculative realist, asserted that things in themselves are beyond the reach of what is epistemologically knowable to us. But with this very move Kant asserts the existence of something that we cannot know. But does not the speculative realist manoeuvre amount to the claim that the very unknowability of things in themselves is not an epistemological barrier, but an ontological, i.e. absolute, character of things as such?¹⁵ Could one not – if one were to be Kantian – simply raise the following question: Why is contingency not simply another (even rather restricted) name for the claim that Kant articulated when he stated that the thing in itself is unknowable, uncognizable? Maybe he articulated this epistemologically, but do the consequences of this claim not come quite close to what the speculative realist claims ontologically?

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¹⁴ Cf. AJHR, p. 95.

¹⁵ If this were to be true, the speculative realist would make a lot of noise about another essentially Hegelian insight.

I will leave all these questions aside for the moment. Now, to return to the above-stated in different terms: *Science proves*, if understood correctly for the speculative realist, *that there is no proof* of any necessity which makes things (and the laws they obey, be it a natural law or other) the way they are – and this is a thesis not about us and our relation to things, but about the things in themselves. *Science proves* in different ways always and ever again the *improvability* of necessity (of the way things are right now). The absolute quality of all things, of all objects, and of nature, etc., is hence that they necessarily can be otherwise. This means also: everything that can be different is contingently how it is. The absolute that science allows one to think, according to the speculative realist, is the *non-necessity of necessity* and with it the *necessity of contingency*.

4. Realists De-Totalizing the Possible

The speculative realist draws one essential consequence from this primary quality of all things, from the insight into this version of the absolute character of everything. Besides Kant, another (metaphysical-correlationalist) enemy enters the scene here: Leibniz.¹⁶ The speculative realist considers the Leibnizian principle of sufficient reason¹⁷ to be the systematic (and importantly: metaphysical) anti-principle to his own position. But this principle nonetheless delineates the very coordinates of the argumentative framework within which the speculative realist can launch the strike against this new opponent. The speculative realist asserts that the very lack of any sufficient reason and principle is precisely taking up the role of the only principle (which cannot be one) of all things. Again simply put: *Taking up Leibniz and inverting him*, the speculative realist claims that *the only sufficient reason for things to be how they are is that there is no sufficient reason for them to be how they are at all*.¹⁸ Again one can see that the central methodological procedure is the procedure of inversion (from problem to solution). At this point Meillassoux introduces the distinction between meta-

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¹⁶ On this point Meillassoux basically seems to give a different formulation to the criticism of Leibniz as a proponent of “constructability”, which was first systematically elaborated by Alain Badiou. See: Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, London / New York 2006: Continuum, pp. 315–326.

¹⁷ As is well known, this principle simply states: Nothing is without a cause or reason why it is (how it is).

¹⁸ At least Meillassoux thinks that this leads to “a world *emancipated from the Principle of Sufficient Reason*.” Cf. Quentin Meillassoux, *Potentiality and Virtuality*, in: ST, pp. 226. Hereinafter cited as QMPV.

physics and speculation. As he puts it: “For I call ‘speculative’ any philosophy that claims to accede to an absolute. But I call ‘metaphysical’ any speculation that claims to accede to the absolute according to a more or less extended modality of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. The Principle of Sufficient Reason consists, in its minimal form, in affirming that existent things have a necessary reason to be as they are rather than otherwise.” (QMIRR) Simply put, metaphysicians (irrationally) believe in the principle of sufficient reason and this very belief (which has no proper logical ground) thus becomes a synonym for irrationality or systematic inconsistency. Implied in it is a belief (in the principle) that is fundamentally driven by the power not to know.¹⁹ What the speculative realist contends against such a position is that knowledge should succeed and metaphysics should in some sense be overcome. Since metaphysics – this is one of the consequences of the speculative realist rationalism – in the last instance becomes synonymous with irrationality and inconsistency.²⁰

To render this in different terms: The speculative realist contends that Hume’s problem is a true problem; hence one has to draw the most radical consequences from it. And hence these consequences have to relate to the very foundation and persistence of laws (within the realm of nature *tout court*). This is why and where Georg Cantor’s “Continuum Hypothesis” enters the picture. The argument runs, “taken together, Hume and Cantor” (AJHR, 134), as follows: if the being of every thing is necessarily contingent (this is its absolute quality), then there can be no law which is exempt from this very contingency. Because laws formulate the relation between radically contingent things this means that they could be

¹⁹ And as one might argue: the most fundamental discipline in which there is a belief that hinders logical consistency, but obfuscates that it does so, is religion (or ideology). Correlationism is not simply metaphysical but also ideological in this precise sense. This is already the argument of the early Marx. For this, see, for example, my review of the work of Simon Critchley at <http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2012/593>.

²⁰ Yet, thus far there is no account – with the exception of some comments on the ideological atmosphere (which could also be related to what I stated in the footnote above) of correlationism [For this see also: Alberto Toscano, *Against Speculation, or, a Critique of the Critique of Critique: A Remark on Quentin Meillassoux’s After Finitude (After Colletti)*, in: ST, pp. 84–91] – of why there is this sort of metaphysical irrationalism. Is it just a failure in reasoning? Is it rationalist philosophy being attacked by irrational sophists or ideological enemies (who tend to apologetically defend what is)? Or is there some sort of spontaneous metaphysics of everyday life, some sort of ordinary spontaneous irrationalism (letting us believe in an anti-Humeian manner that there is a cause for all things) that needs to be countered – and perhaps can never be abolished in general?

other than they are, thus: the existence of any law itself is contingent. What this then means is that one cannot infer any probable set of cases when things (and the laws describing their relations) will change. The speculative realist thereby envisages a “contingency so radical that it would incorporate all conceivable futures of the present laws, including that consisting in the absence of modification.” (QMPV, 226) If Hume’s problem of induction thus concerned the actuality and effectivity of any law thinkable (its instalment as much as its maintenance), the consequence that can be drawn from its positivized ontologization is that it is a completely rational and consistent stance to consider the way the world is fully devoid of any reason whatsoever. But, and here comes the catch, why then do the laws under which we live not change permanently?

The answer to this question is another cornerstone in the speculative realist argumentative rationalist fortress. Why? Because, it leads him to deny the rationality (and consistency) of any form of probabilistic or stochastic reasoning.²¹ What this is supposed to mean can be rendered intelligible in the following way: The assumption that the insight into the absolutely contingent origin of any law (and any thing) existing in the given world allows inferring any probability of it changing, is simply a wrong assumption, a mistaken inference. Why? Because thinking the absolute (the contingency of everything that there is) does not imply that one can infer from it any state of the world which is more probable than another. It is, as the speculative realist claims, simply not true that from such a contingency one could derive a necessary or probable frequency of change within the laws (and things) of the world. The speculative realist slogan for this is: “One needs to detotalize the possible.” (QMPV, 231) This is precisely where Georg Cantor can help.

5. Fighting the Metaphysics (of the Probable)

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Cantor demonstrated that there cannot be a set of all sets, an infinity encompassing all sizes of infinity.²² This can be applied here in the following way: Since

²¹ Again put in more direct terms: Probabilism and stochastic calculation is metaphysics (in mathematics).

²² A far too simple two-step account of Cantor’s mathematical revolution can be given in the following way: 1. Consider the everyday intuition that the set of all prime numbers seems to be a part of the set of natural numbers. Yet whilst being a part thereof, one can clearly see that both are infinite. Cantor demonstrated that one can compare the size of these two infinite

everything is contingent, one cannot even start from a given – even infinite– number of stable coordinates or elements from which one then could derive a (series of) case(s) that is (are) more probable than any other. Simply put: It is not that X (a law, a thing) has contingent properties, it is that the very existence of X is contingent. Therefore the very existence of X cannot be presupposed. Put into a broader context: If the existence of X₁ is contingent and the existence of X₂ is contingent, the very existence of the law determining their relation also has to be considered to be contingent. This radical contingency is what can be deciphered as the absolute character of things. If things can be different, laws depicting their relationships are necessarily contingent, too.

Hence, as soon as one tries to argue for a stability or instability of the given laws, one takes these very laws to be something like a constant (which, as the speculative realist insists, they are not).²³ Probabilism relies on at least one thing: the stability of a given set of elements, even though there might be infinitely many and even though the ways of combining these elements are even greater in terms of infinity (and even while arguing for a necessarily implied possibility of change to take place). In order to be put to work, probabilistic reason needs a fixed set of elements from which it can derive (more or less) probable (possible) actualizations. Probabilism calculates via totalizing the possible (cases that po-

sets by assigning each number of each set a place in an order of elements of the same set. One can thereby prove if for any place of a number of a set there is a corresponding number in the second. In this case, number 1 takes the first place in the order of natural number, 2 the second, and ad infinitum; the order in the set of prime numbers assigns to the first places the numbers 1, 3, 5, 7, continuing *ad infinitum*. By proving that for each number in the set of natural numbers there is a corresponding number in the set of prime numbers, Cantor proved that the set of primes and natural numbers are of the same size (power), yet they are both infinite. He thus proved that sizes of infinity can be compared. 2. In using the axiom of the power set, Cantor demonstrated that from each given set one can construct a set whose size is greater than the size of the original set (the power set axiom, radically simplified, entails all the ways in which the elements of the given set can be combined, and as there are always more ways of combining elements than there are elements, one can construct a greater set). Thus, starting from the set of natural numbers he was able to demonstrate that there has to be a set of greater infinity (and this continues infinitely) and at the same time he demonstrated the bi-univocal equating of places and numbers does not work for all infinite sets (the set of real numbers is larger than the set of natural numbers; the whole question is then by how much). For a more adequate account of this, cf. Shaughan Lavine, *Understanding the Infinite*, Harvard 1998: Harvard University Press.

²³ The inversion taking place here is that even when one argues for (more or less probable) change (of things or laws), one can rely on a presupposition that is wrong (i.e. metaphysical).

tentially actualize); speculative realism does not calculate but assumes to have demonstrated that (probabilist) calculation starts from irrational, unscientific, i.e. metaphysical assumptions. De-totalizing the possible amounts to claiming that the emergence of something new due to fully contingent reasons (that is: due to no reasons at all) has to be conceived of as an emergence *ex nihilo* which in the act of its emergence creates its own possibility.²⁴ By showing that any probabilist calculation of change or stability (of the given laws of things) presupposes something that cannot be presupposed (i.e. a pre-existing set of possible cases that then actualize contingently), the speculative realist gets rid of any idea of a totality of the possible by subtracting any prior existence. For the probabilist metaphysician, it is the actualization of a possibility that is contingent. Against this the speculative realist begins by drawing consequences from the following axiom: *contingency precedes existence*.²⁵ This comes down to claiming that “anything is possible,”²⁶ even the abolishment of contingency (and the

²⁴ The reach of this argument has been noted most precisely by Slavoj Žižek. Cf. his *Less Than Nothing. Hegel and the Spectre of Dialectical Materialism*, London / New York 2012: Verso. Hereinafter cited as SZLN.

²⁵ It is here that Meillassoux introduces the distinction between potentiality and chance or contingency and virtuality. The former marks the actualization within the framework of a given set of cases (throwing a die actualizes one of the possible and pre-existing cases or numbers turning up), the latter mark an actualization which generates its own possibility within the act of actualization. Cf. QMPV, pp. 231-232. I stick here to the classical terminology only for the sake of brevity. What I refer to as contingency is what Meillassoux calls virtuality. One additional remark on this topic: By introducing this distinction, in my view, Meillassoux reacts to a criticism first formulated by Ray Brassier which he framed in the following way: Although Meillassoux seeks to formulate how to think something “anterior” to thought (or the existence of consciousness or human beings) and thereby seeks to think the primary quality of things in themselves (i.e. the absolute), he still relies – with the very term of “anteriority” – on some sort of ‘objective’ conception of time that was already refuted by Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity (and is thus not up to the scientific standard of its own time). (Cf. Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound. Enlightenment and Extinction*, Basingstoke 2007: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 58ff.) I read Meillassoux’s emphasis of – in my terms – contingency (preceding existence) as an answer to this criticism. It is not that there is an objective time as a constant which would enable us to conceive of ‘something’ that would lie ‘prior’ to or is ‘anterior’ to our own existence, as this would amount to something existent that precedes our existence; it is rather that this anteriority persists in the very possibility that everything could change at any instant and thereby what is “anterior” is a may-be(ing). Thereby Meillassoux seems to try to eliminate any ‘objective’ time, i.e. any form of chronology, since even the emergence of time would then be a contingent event.

²⁶ I here refer to an article by Peter Hallward discussing Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*. The criticism he articulates is profound and I think it cannot be refuted all too easily. Cf. Peter Hall-

implementation of an absolute necessity), that is, the coming-into-being of a yet inexistent God,²⁷ or even the absence of any change till the very end of time.

ward, *Anything is Possible. A Reading of Quentin Meillassoux's After Finitude*, in: ST, pp. 130-141. Hereinafter cited as PWAP.

²⁷ I consider this one to be one of the weakest points in Meillassoux's argument, although it is presented as being a consistent consequence of his overall proposal. One simple first version of this argument runs as follows: If (1.) we know and can demonstrate that God does not exist (i.e. there is no set of all sets, as Cantor has proven), and if (2.) everything is contingent and therefore possible, and we (3.) have demonstrated that we cannot limit the range of what is possible, we can infer from this (4.) that a God might – although inexistent right now – come into being at one point in the future. The problem with this argument is that Meillassoux also links it to a, in some sense, renewed theodicy (i.e. ethical) discussion. His claim is that his phrasing can present a solution to the following philosophical fiasco: a.) either God does not exist and the contingent quality of all human life of being finite is nothing but a meaningless, contingent fact, that is to say, there is no (meaningful) explanation whatsoever for the human condition. This amounts to claiming that human life is immanently meaningless. Or: b.) There is a God but then he is the greatest sadist of them all, as every day he enjoys the consequences of the very finitude of all human life. As b.) is logically ruled out and option a.) needs to be avoided for ethical reasons, as Meillassoux argues, the only consistent solution to this problem for him is: c.) There might be a contingent emergence of a God at some point in the future which will redeem all human beings from their finitude (although he is not responsible for it). Upon coming into existence he will take back all the injustices that mankind has suffered beforehand. This position implies believing “in God because he does not exist.” Although this “has never been systematically defended,” now “it [...] has been done.” Cf. Quentin Meillassoux, *Excerpts from L'inexistence divine*, in: Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux. Philosophy in the Making*, Edinburgh 2011: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 175-238, esp. pp. 225ff and p. 238. See also: Quentin Meillassoux, *Deuil à venir, dieu à venir*, in: *Critique*, No. 704/705, January / February 2006, pp. 105-115. To formulate my disagreement in very few words: What if one simply does not accept the coordinates of the dilemma Meillassoux outlines? What if the meaninglessness of human life as such is not the problem (as much as its finitude is not a veritable problem)? What if the problem does not lie in the fact that we are finite beings and our existence is thus doomed to be meaningless, but rather that even this finitude can be perceived as non-totalizing, that is to say: ‘something’ can happen to us that creates desires which drive us to act as if we were non-finite? Might not the best – and perhaps cheesiest – example be love, which begins from utter contingency and generates a form of ‘salvation’ by creating a whole new world without any need of a coming-God that will save us? I here side again with Adrian Johnston, who pointed out that Meillassoux's position implies a “non-metaphysical theology.” (AJHR, p. 94) My scepticism concerning his argument is based upon my even greater scepticism toward a revival of theological arguments in a rationalist, non-metaphysical framework. To quote Johnston again on this point: “Meillassoux can be viewed as an inversion of Žižek, as an anti-Žižek: whereas Žižek tries to smuggle atheism into Christianity via the immanent critique of a Hegelian dialectical interpretation of Christianity for the sake of a progressive radical leftist politics of Communism, Meillassoux, whether knowingly or unknowingly, smuggles idealist religiosity back into materialist atheism via a

6. The Age of Scientists. Totalizing Un-Totalizability

Everything is contingent. This is the speculative realist slogan par excellence. All that is and all that can be is contingent and can thus change at any instant. *Everything is contingent and hence anything is possible.* Since any-thing is subject to the (only) necessity of contingency.²⁸ This is the primary quality of everything that is, its condition of possibility. Contingency is the condition of possibility and this is a completely non-metaphysical and consistent claim, since this transcendental (contingency) no longer even implies existence at it seems. *Everything is contingent and hence anything is possible since contingency is the logical anterior to any existence whatsoever.*

But this slogan also indicates in my view *the* most problematic aspect of the speculative realist enterprise. If the mathematician Georg Cantor proved that there are infinitely different sizes of infinity and if this very proof becomes a crucial moment in the speculative realist argument, via its insistence that there can never be a set of all possibilities of (possible) change(s that might emerge) – that is to say, contingency like infinities cannot be totalized – the speculative realist at the same time claims that everything that is, *all* that there is, is contingent. *Everything is contingent.*²⁹ It is precisely the assumption of such an “everything” that can be read as the marker of the problem.³⁰ To put it as concisely as pos-

non-dialectical ‘materialism’.”(AJHR, p. 113) More on the non-dialectical element of Meillassoux’s thought will follow shortly below.

²⁸ To state this again explicitly: This is due to the (absolute) equation of being and may-be(ing). Thus, what is the *absolute being* of all things is that they *may-be* different than they are. *Being qua being is what being may-be qua may-being.*

²⁹ Here one might again be reminded of a move common to Martin Heidegger’s thought. Just think of him referring to “being in its totality / beings in a whole (*das Seiende im Ganzen*)”. Although this might not indicate that for him there is a totality of beings (all the beings (*Seiendes*) that are), it still refers to a whole of being (*Sein*). This simply implies that there is a whole at all. For comments on rendering this phrase in English, see: *Heidegger, Translation, and the Task of Thinking*, ed. by Frank Schalow, Dordrecht / Heidelberg / London / New York 2011: Springer, p. 33ff. Badiou somewhere remarked once that Heidegger is simply mistaken, taken by the very standards of his own thought, to speak of something like beings in whole/being-in-its-totality. My argument against Meillassoux attempts to repeat this gesture of criticism.

³⁰ Yet, Meillassoux seems to explicitly advocate a position that Žižek already linked to the Lacanian notion of the “non-all”: “Quentin Meillassoux has outlined the contours of a post-metaphysical materialist ontology whose basic premise is the Cantorian multiplicity of infinities which cannot be totalized into an all-encompassing One. Such an ontology of non-All asserts radical contingency: not only are there no laws which hold with necessity, every law

sible, with this (implicit) move the speculative realist is guilty of a one-sided, *non-dialectical generalization of un-totalizability*.

One might also formulate this criticism in different terms: The speculative realist argues firstly that contingency precedes existence, yet he has to claim that, secondly, everything is contingent (hence possible), and thereby he, thirdly, asserts that there is something like an ‘everything’ and that it can be best comprehended as being contingent. He thus claims two things at the same time that do not consistently come together: *Contingency precedes existence* and contingency is an attribute of everything that already is, i.e. *existence precedes contingency* (contingency being an attribute of any existence whatsoever).³¹ Put differently: *if contingency precedes existence*, there is an existence, or more precisely a (necessary) *being* of contingency which thus precedes contingency. Even if this is inverted again and rendered in retroactive terms, one ends up with the following result: Contingency becomes another name for everything (i.e. the necessary being in its totality). Or again differently: *non-totalizability is all there is*. To put my criticism in Hegelian terms: The totalization of untotalizability directly implies an abstract notion of contingency. This is why I think Peter Hallward is right when he critically states that there is a conflation of (the ontological and the ontic) layer in the speculative realist’s work. He applies Cantor’s idea of different larger infinites to our material universe, its laws, as if this idea were the “royal

is in itself contingent, it can be overturned at any moment.” (SZLN, pp. 227–229) I find Žižek’s reading compelling and I clearly see that this is a solid reconstruction of what Meillassoux aims at. Yet Žižek himself later counters Meillassoux’s very understanding of the “non-all” (by preferring a masculine interpretation of the non-all as relying on a constitutive exception) in a way that I believe to be close to my own. (Cf. SZLN, p. 369)

³¹ The speculative realist thereby seems to miss the Hegelian logic of retroactivity. Contingency can only be logically anterior to existence *if* there already is existence. Contingency is the retroactive anteriority to any existence *because* there is existence (thus it is not contingency that generates existence, but existence generates insight into the very anteriority of contingency and hence already determines contingency). In any other sense the thesis that contingency precedes existence embodies nothing but a mistaken logical inference, since claiming that before existence there is only contingency entails stating that there is ‘something’ before contingency, i.e. the being of contingency (which obviously cannot be explained via contingency, this is why this being is necessary). Even if retroactivity might become included in the speculative realist’s framework, the problem is not that easily done away with. The ultimate negative version (there is nothing but negativity preceding existence) is discussed at length in the present volume by Adrian Johnston under the inventive label of the “myth of the non-given.” Cf. Adrian Johnston, *Reflections of a Rotten Nature: Hegel, Lacan and Material Negativity* in the present volume.

road to the in itself.” (PWAP, 139) Simply put: such an approach lacks the necessary concreteness to actually account for the contingent change it conjures. I am tempted to contend that this problem – let us call this the “problem of abstraction” – is related to one crucial implication which I have already marked in passing several times. The speculative realist – legitimately – insists on contingency and rationality against any version of metaphysical irrationalism and thereby seeks to invent yet another version of the destruction of metaphysics. Yet, when he sees the most crucial outcome of a metaphysical position in the ignorance toward the impact (and content) of scientific statements and thereby toward the fact that science thinks, the speculative realist plays out a renewed, different approach to science, that is to say, to (scientific) knowledge. We are, to actualize a name coined by Alain Badiou, in the *age of the scientists*.³²

We can think the absolute (contingent) being of all things because we can know that they can be different. Starting from this primacy of knowledge against metaphysics – which relies on an irrational drive to not know (what it knows), the speculative realist manoeuvres himself into a problem: If knowledge becomes the crucial category, this is because the knowledge of contingency is itself a contingent knowledge and it knows this. But this sort of reflexive knowledge of contingency produces the problem that the very reason of its reflexivity obscures that this very reason eschews any concrete conception of change actually (although contingently) occurring. The contingently existent – yet absolute – knowledge of contingency makes it – surprisingly – impossible to have a theory of the revision of knowledge. Adrian Johnston phrased this in a pointed, yet polemical way: “In terms of scientific practice, Meillassoux’s speculative materialism, centered on the omnipotent sovereign capriciousness of an absolute time of ultimate contingency, either makes no difference whatsoever (i.e., self-respecting scientists ignore it for a number of very good theoretical and practi-

³² I obviously refer here to Badiou’s famous reference to the “age of poets.” See: Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, Albany 1999: State University of New York Press, pp. 69–78. I was tempted to begin the following passage of the article by also re-actualizing Badiou’s opening formulations regarding the age of poets. This would have read like this: “In the period that opens up after Badiou, a period in which philosophy is most often sutured either to the poetic condition or threatened with disappearance completely, science assumed certain functions of philosophy’s function. [...] Yet, the science and scientists we are speaking of are neither all the science nor all the scientists, but rather those whose work is immediately recognizable as a work of thought and for whom science is, at the very locus where philosophy falters, a locus of knowledge wherein a proposition about being and about time is enacted.”

cal reasons) or licenses past scientific mistakes and/or present bad science being sophistically conjured away by cheap-and-easy appeals to hyper-Chaos. As regards the second prong of this discomforting fork, one should try imagining a particle physicist whose experimental results fail to be replicated by other particle physicists protesting that, in the intervening time between his/her experiments and their subsequent re-enactment by others, an instantaneous contingent shift in the causal mechanisms of nature in itself intervened. Why should this physicist correct him/her-self when he/she conveniently can blame his/her epistemological errors on the speculated ontological reality of hyper-Chaos?" (AJHR, p. 101) In some sense, I contend that to begin with knowledge of untotalizability necessarily implies a totalization of this very untotalizability.³³ Even the knowledge of the absolute (contingent) character of all things may-be just a little bit too objective. *A too objective may-be.*

The consequences of this non-dialectical totalization are not only problematic, they are multifold. I would just like to mention a few things that seem to be unavoidable when one generalizes or hypostatizes (the) untotalizability (of the possible): With it there is *one* order of all things which cannot be changed (unless it changes by the very principle of this very order, which at the same time means that there is no change at all). For, there is *one* necessity that is the necessity of contingency. This implies that there is precisely not what the whole project aimed to develop: possibilities of change.³⁴ But this means – and I think

³³ The argument I am putting forward here could also be phrased in different terms: As soon as one starts without the distinction of (objective) knowledge and (subjective) truth, one ends up endorsing some sort of objectivism. This to me seems to also be the case with Meillassoux. This is why I take it to be no surprise that he cannot account for any concrete change actually occurring (a revision of knowledge, for example). He ends up losing what he aimed to achieve. I think that against this one-sided approach it needs to be argued that a revision of knowledge can only be a consequence of something other than knowledge: truth. Yet, truth is not an objective nor an abstract category, but a procedural one that implies the concrete re-working of concrete and situational knowledges as one of its consequences. Furthermore, it needs to be stated that a truth not only produces something like a revision of knowledge, but it does so not by solely indicating the untotalizability of a given situation, it rather links untotalizability (opening unforeseeable possibilities within a world) and an act of totalization (which Badiou names "forcing") together. For more on this, see: Frank Ruda, *For Badiou. Idealism Without Idealism* (forthcoming).

³⁴ Put differently: this is also the reason why there is no real theory of the event in this version of speculative realism. For this, see: Tzuchien Tho, *An Interview with Alain Badiou*, in: Alain Badiou, *The Rational Kernel of Hegelian Dialectic*, Melbourne 2011: re-press, pp. 104 ff.

this is the most fundamental problem – that there is simply no real event (with concrete and not immediately universal consequences that change the world), or at least there is always one and the same form of (the contingent) event. Why? Because the one and only thing which is not contingent is the necessity of contingency that makes everything be contingent. And one necessary effect of this necessity is the totalization of contingency. *For the speculative realist, everything is contingent and thus everything necessary: contingency becomes hyper-determinism.*³⁵

An anecdote of one of the greatest thinkers of contingency – which was recently brought up by Alenka Zupančič³⁶ in a similar context – can here outline a possible answer to the speculative realist’s dilemma: G.W.F. Hegel notes after visiting the Alps in Bern – his friends wanted to convince him of their beauty and sublime character – the following into his travel journal: “Neither the eye nor the imagination finds on these formless masses a point on which the former could repose with appreciation or on which the latter could find an activity or a game. The mineralogist alone finds material to risk insufficient speculations about the revolutions of these mountains. Reason finds in the thought of the endurance of these mounts, or in this sort of sublimity that one assigns to them, nothing impressive or anything that would extort astonishment or admiration. The sight of these eternally dead masses did not give me anything but the uniform, and when protracted boring, impression: That’s the way it is. [*Es ist so*].”³⁷ One can and should here learn from Hegel. And that which can be learned is that there is nothing to think in the subject-independent nature – nature is nothing but stupid³⁸ – except *that there is nothing to think* in it. One can thus learn from

³⁵ Without any question, the first to have demonstrated this is Lorenzo Chiesa, to whom I am also indebted for much discussion that helped to clarify the arguments formulated above. Cf. his brilliant: Lorenzo Chiesa, *Hyper-Structuralism’s Necessity of Contingency*, in: \$, *Journal of the Jan Van Eyck Circle For Lacanian Ideology Critique*, Vol. 3 (2010), pp. 159–176.

³⁶ Cf. Alenka Zupančič: *Realism in Psychoanalysis* (unpublished typescript).

³⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Auszüge aus dem Tagebuch der Reise in die Berner Oberalpen (1796)*, in: *Werke*, Vol. 2, Frankfurt am Main 1986, Suhrkamp, p. 618.

³⁸ Hegel’s philosophy of nature, as under-appreciated as it might be, is one of the greatest achievements in his philosophical system. The reason for this is that as nature is simply what it is without any reason for it being the way it is, it contains a complete theory of contingency. In one of his most impressive texts Dieter Henrich pointed out that for Hegel nature is simply another name for contingency. (Cf. Dieter Henrich, in: *Hegel im Kontext*, Frankfurt a. M. 2010: Suhrkamp, pp. 157–186.) To refer here to a simple example: There is no reason whatsoever why

Hegel that the necessity of contingency (“That is”; “*Es ist*”) is itself contingent (“the way it is”; “*so*”). If one thereby (dialectically) thinks the contingency of the necessity of contingency, one understands that not everything, not all that there is, is contingent but it is rather not-all that is contingent (which to simplify it to the utmost is simply not-all). Hegel is here, as always, right. Also as regards the speculative realist. If one seeks to think the things as they are in themselves, one has to commence with thinking – even if this sounds a bit uncouth: *Es ist so*; that’s the way it is.³⁹

7. Speculative Realism’s Lenin and Stalin: from Speculative Contingency to Realist Financial Speculation

Quentin Meillassoux’s book *After Finitude*, in which he presented most of the arguments discussed above, has been said to entail a comparable theoretical job as Lenin’s 1908 *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. It has been claimed that it is an actualized version of this book for the twenty-first century. This very comparison brought up by Slavoj Žižek⁴⁰ implies in my mind a question to be raised here. If the speculative realist takes the position of a certain Lenin, who then is his Marx and who is – maybe even more daring – this Lenin’s Stalin, if there is one? The first question might be answered immediately and without any problem: It is Alain Badiou.⁴¹ It is he who first referred to Georg Cantor when attempting to propose a fundamental theory of any thinkable situation, proposed a renewed stance on the relationship between (philosophical) thought and science, and he affirmed unforeseeable events. But let me leave the well-known details of this answer aside here and immediately turn to the second question:

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there are, say, 878 sorts of apes and not 888. The only thing to be understood here is that there is nothing to understand.

³⁹ One might here also use a word by Lacan by modifying it a bit. Lacan once said that not only the beggar who thinks that he is a king is mad, but also the king who seriously thinks that he is a king and thinks that his symbolic mandate is grounded in his natural properties. Does not the position of the speculative realist force us to rephrase this saying? I am a bit tempted to claim that it is today not only the idealist who thinks he is a materialist that is mad, but also the materialist who thinks that he is one.

⁴⁰ Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *An Answer to Two Questions*, in: Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformation*, Evanston 2009, Northwestern University Press, pp. 174–230.

⁴¹ This is even quite consistent with Badiou’s own assessment of the contemporary situation (cf. footnote 1). Also, it is a well-known fact that Badiou was the mentor of the speculative realist in question. From such a perspective this also means: a new Marx is amongst us.

Who is this Lenin's Stalin? But why this analogy-game? Because if something 'of Lenin' can be grasped in a perverted way in Stalin,⁴² the same might hold for the speculative realist's enterprise. And astonishingly this question can indeed be answered. For there is someone who in some sense re-wrote Stalin's 1926 *The Economic Situation of the Soviet Union and the Policy of the Party*.⁴³ It is Elie Ayache, a former options market champion, who proposed the application of certain speculative realist insights to the real-real world, which is to say the financial market system. His book, entitled the *Blank Swan: The End of Probability*,⁴⁴ attempts to revamp the view on specifically economical science – as speculative realism seeks to revamp the perspective on science in general – by applying the idea of untotalizable possibilities, i.e. of (ontological) contingency to the very conceptual understanding of the market. In some sense, this book dares to propose an economic policy (i.e. economic theory based on speculative realist claims) for speculative realists. Maybe there are people that wondered what to do financially – say, stock-market wise – when being a speculative realist. And if there are none yet, then some might come into existence in the near or distant future. So: there is indeed an answer to this.

As strange – and highly controversial – as this might seem, what Ayache – as a speculative financial realist – claims is consistently argued if one accepts the framework of the delineated speculative realist.⁴⁵ Ayache's argument goes like

⁴² I am here thinking of the diagnosis that Stalin(ism) presents a literally perverted form of the universalist kernel of Lenin. If there was anyone who was addressed within the revolutionary framework of Lenin (this is why world revolution was indeed an issue), it is precisely anyone who became a possible victim of state terror under Stalin. This Stalinist perversion still relies on the universal core of the previous Leninist position that made the former possible in the first place.

⁴³ Cf. J.V. Stalin, *The Economic Situation of the Soviet Union and the Policy of the Party*, in: *Works*, Vol. 8. January-November 1926, Moscow 1954: Foreign Language Publishing House, pp. 123–157.

⁴⁴ Elie Ayache, *The Blank Swan: The End of Probability*, Sussex 2010: John Wiley & Sons. Hereinafter cited as EABS. I owe the reference to this quite peculiar project to Nina Power. Ayache worked from 1990-5 as an "options market-maker" at LIFFE (London International Financial Futures and Options Exchange) and before that from 1987–90 at MATIF (Marché à Terme International de France). Cf. EABS, p. XV.

This book is an – acknowledged – reaction to the book by Nassim Nicholas Taleb that deals with highly improbable events, see his: *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, Allen Lane 2007: Random House.

⁴⁵ Let us put it like this: From time to time it can be quite telling to take a look at the children (i.e. pupils) that certain (founding) fathers (of a philosophical trend or tendency) have produced.

this: Any form of probability theory proposes defined and separately existing states of the world in order to then apply stochastic calculation and reasoning to it. Yet, what can be grasped from the very notion of probability – as it has been modelled philosophically⁴⁶ – is that it is itself derived from the real character of equity exchanges.⁴⁷ The attempt to calculate how “prizes” go up and down on the market seems to be able to rely on a stable concatenation of causes and effects, but the market as such does not really allow, according to Ayache, for inferring such lawfulness.⁴⁸ Simply put: “[b]ecause the market is composed of numbers (prizes), we feel confident applying probability to it” – but we are mistaken and follow an irrational belief in doing so. Why is that? Because one might think a prize occurring on the market is the product of a series of more or less interdependent and more or less stable elements influencing one another. Yet, for Ayache the market is as the world is for the speculative realist, i.e. not made of stable coordinates or states with which one can calculate. This is why, for example, as one might state, a crisis cannot be predicted, it just happens. The slogan for this realist speculative position is: “Each day brings a new prize and a new market” (EAEP) – a somehow completely, even if actually unchanged “new state of the market-world.”⁴⁹ (EABS, XX)

Thus – let’s call him like this – the realist speculator opposes the widespread probabilist economic reason with its (metaphysical and irrational) belief in stable states of the world and possible calculations of the future (tendencies, etc.) and draws the following conclusion: If contingency is absolute and the very existence of the world is a contingent event, the market – as our world – also

⁴⁶ At one point Ayache refers to the work of Ian Hacking. The most elaborate account to the best of my knowledge can be found in his *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference*, Cambridge 2006: Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁷ As Ayache summarizes in a brief article that presents his major claims: “probability is in fact philosophically defined after price.” It “is then defined as a sequence of outcomes that are insensitive to gambling systems. ‘Banker’ and ‘gambler’, precisely the personae who deal with money and prices, not with probabilities.” Cf. Elie Ayache, *The End of Probability*, At: http://www.ito33.com/sites/default/files/articles/1011_ayache.pdf. Hereinafter cited as EAEP.

⁴⁸ Here it seems to be overly clear that this project cannot but argue for abolishing the Marxist idea of a critique of political economy.

⁴⁹ As will be well known to the reader, it is hard to imagine a wording that goes more against the position of Alain Badiou, as he insisted over and over again that “market” is precisely the name of the complete absence of a world (and its implied symbolic positions). The realist speculator hence takes a position as far from Badiou as Stalin took from Marx.

has to be conceived of as being a contingent event, “an event” (EABS, pp. 61-87) that does not abolish contingency but perpetuates it. The market renews itself every day since its stability or instability is nothing but a result of the absolute character of all things. A throw of the prize will never abolish chance. The realist speculator thus repeats the speculative realist gesture par excellence of turning the very formulation of a problem (how to predict market dynamics, prevent crises, etc.?) into its solution. The market is just another instance where the move of positivizing ontologization can be applied. That is to say, one has to draw all the conclusions from the fact that the market can change every day, hour, minute, or second. Because all it is is a concatenation of contingent prizes that interfere with each other. But what are prizes? Prizes are contingent claims that produce a difference. A claim on something contingently appears and interacts, and is exchanged with other contingent claims. The very medium of this contingent exchange of contingencies is the market. This is why, according to the realist speculator, what holds for the market is: “Don’t ask why or how. This is [...] the definition of the market [...].” (EAEP)⁵⁰ Do not ask why or how, for the solution to your very question is and will always be contingency. Contingency is to be blamed if you lose; contingency is to be thanked if you win in the contingent games of contingencies.⁵¹ At least one thing seems to be clear: it is contingency that will always and forever be responsible (for everything).

It seems as if the wording of Adrian Johnston concerning the speculative realist applies also to the realist speculator. Johnston claimed that the speculative realist develops a position that somehow resembles “an easily defended (but empty) fortress.” (AJHR, p. 111) This harsh criticism is based upon the following observation: “After relying on the realm of the reasonable, it tries to evade further critical evaluation at the level of the reasonable by attempting to escape into the confined enclosure of the strictly rational.” (AJHR, p. 111.) In my view, with regard to the realist speculator a slightly different version of the same criticism can and should be applied. Since he also relies on the non-metaphysical and rationalist – i.e. speculative realist – claim regarding the necessity of con-

⁵⁰ I leave some – rather deconstructivist– undertones aside here. For, Ayache claims that what holds for the market also holds for the very definition of writing. Cf. EABS, pp. 87–122.

⁵¹ As much as this position presents itself as a new position with regard to market dynamics, this has already been the position of what Hegel called the “rich rabble”. For its relation to contingency, see: Frank Ruda, *Hegel’s Rabble. An Investigation into Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, London / New York 2011: Continuum, pp. 35–74.

tingency (as the only absolute character of all things and laws) and he also shares the methodology of inverting a problem into its solution (i.e. positivized ontologization). Yet, the outcome of the realist speculation is even more problematic than the outcome of the speculative realist's manoeuvres. Somehow the easily defended fortress is not even empty anymore; it seems to have become inhabited by investment bankers. Rendered differently, the realist speculator's position, i.e. defending that there is no reason whatsoever for why things are the way they are is nothing but apologetic⁵² of the state things are in right now. It is apologetic as only contingency is responsible. Thereby the realist speculator abolishes responsibility *tout court* and if ultimately the market can change at any instant for no reason whatsoever his position abolishes history.

If anything meaningful is to be learned from speculative realism's Stalin, it might be that its Lenin already runs the risk of rationally and consistently defending a position that places all its emphasis on a totalization of untotalizable contingency and can by this very move very easily become an apologist (for the present state of things). Over-accentuating contingency as the only relevant ontological category (relating thought and science) can thus easily come dangerously close to becoming a very useful servant to all those (ideological) positions that actually enjoy business as usual. In order to prevent this from happening it does not seem enough to insist on going against what happened with Kant (and attacking the concept of critique). To prevent the renewal of the rationalist "critical criticism" (Marx) that ends up in abstraction, today it seems that the task lies rather in renewing the very notion of critique in its relation to concrete situations and practices (including, *inter alia*, science). Either one abolishes concrete critique *tout court* (i.e. critical criticism) or one begins to be critical of critique itself (i.e. one takes a meta-critical position). The latter work still needs to be undertaken.

⁵² One here might be reminded of the following joke: "An indigent client who had been injured in an accident went looking for a lawyer to represent him *pro bono*. One lawyer told him that he would take the case on contingency. When the client asked what 'contingency' was, the lawyer replied, "If I don't win your lawsuit, I don't get anything. If I do win your lawsuit, you don't get anything."