

Research Article

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Meillassoux and Heidegger – How to Deal with Things-in-Themselves?

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Abstract: In his critique of post-Kantian philosophy, Meillassoux expresses considerable doubts as to how it is capable of describing a world independent of man. He places Heidegger among the ranks of thinkers who are caught in the same trap of the thought-world circle. In this article, I will first examine which complex indirect proof Meillassoux uses to find a path towards an independent reality. In the next step, I will discuss where Heidegger locates Beings in themselves against the backdrop of the Dasein-Being correlation. A radical change of perspective on what it means to be a thinking and understanding “subject” is proposed in this context. In contrast to Meillassoux, an appropriate interpretation of Heidegger’s Dasein can show that there is no need for an indirect proof of a real outside of the correlation. The decisive question is how Heidegger’s correlation of Dasein and Being can be reconciled with statements about the ancestral or whether it stands in implacable opposition to such statements.

Keywords: Meillassoux, Heidegger, speculative materialism, phenomenology

1 Introduction

In his critique of post-Kantian philosophy, Meillassoux has considerable doubts about its ability to describe a world independent of human beings. In the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, knowledge is confined to the domain of phenomena. According to this perspective, the objects of experience are shaped by the human mind as a result of its capacity to structure and categorize sensory data. In contrast, things-in-themselves are beyond the limits of human knowledge. Meillassoux calls such an epistemological position weak correlationism. According to such a view, objects of experience are always correlated with the activity of the human mind. “Weak” is such a correlationism insofar as it opens the door to some objects outside human knowledge – things-in-themselves can be thought without contradiction, but they are unknowable. But if we consider the convincing results of the natural sciences, which describe the history of the earth down to the smallest detail long before man, i.e., at a time when there were no human beings on the earth at all, we may wonder how all these results can be reduced to unknowable things-in-themselves. In essence, the findings of the natural sciences and Kant’s noumena, defined as an unknowable domain beyond the reach of human understanding, appear to be at odds with one another. The natural sciences, to give an example, attribute to dinosaurs properties that would be the same even if man had never appeared in the course of Earth’s history. But how can such statements ever be justified? Meillassoux sees a problem here. He calls it the “problem of ancestrality”¹: “I will call ‘ancestral’ any reality anterior to the emergence of the human species – or even

¹ Meillassoux, *Time without Becoming*, 3.

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anterior to every recognized form of life on earth.”² How can the natural sciences find some evidence for statements about the ancestral if all objects of experience are a correlate of the human mind?

In his criticism of correlationism, Meillassoux goes one step further. He criticizes the thesis that the existence of a thing is always closely related to the presence of a thinking subject. This stronger claim implies that things in themselves cannot only be known but cannot even be thought without contradiction. Indeed, “correlationism rests on an argument as simple as it is powerful, which can be formulated as follows: there can be no X without a givenness of X, and no theory about X without a positing of X. If you speak about something, the correlationist will say, you speak about something that is given to you, and posited by you.”³ Correlationism, as Meillassoux sees it, is not limited to Kantian philosophy. It encompasses all philosophical positions that treat objects as intrinsically bound to conscious subjects. Such a thought-world correlation can appear in different manifestations: reality can depend on social constructs, culture, language, concepts, and so on. He takes correlationism as an umbrella term for all forms of antirealism in contemporary philosophy (transcendental philosophy, phenomenology, postmodernism). What he is aiming at are the “Great Outdoors ... that outside which is not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it was.”⁴

Meillassoux places Heidegger in the ranks of thinkers who are caught in the same trap of the thought-world circle. After all, it was Heidegger who posed the question of the meaning of Being in the context of an analysis of human existence. We need to only recall Heidegger’s famous but also controversial thesis that there can only be Being if there is Dasein.⁵ For Heidegger, the human being is not an isolated subject but a Being always involved in a world. However, Meillassoux still insists on asking whether such a human-world correlation can explain how the sciences are able to speak so precisely about a “pre-human and pre-animal reality.”⁶ To put it succinctly: “What would nature without us be?”⁷ Meillassoux’s brief answer is “We discover that Heidegger is unable to renounce to this question.”⁸

To show how people can have knowledge of things-in-themselves independently of their access to them, Meillassoux uses an indirect proof. In order to find a way out into the “great outdoors,” he initially assumes that correlationism is true. Peter Gratton even calls Meillassoux’s recognition of the reality of the correlative circle “the hidden premise of his argument.”⁹ But – as Meillassoux concludes – in order to defend the truth of her own argument, the correlationist must acknowledge an absolute reality beyond the limits of her own correlative circle. We will see later exactly what this means. What I want to show in this article, however, is that Meillassoux’s indirect proof of a reality in itself is an unnecessary bypass. It is simply not true, I maintain, that *all* forms of correlationism are incapable of making sense of the phenomenon of ancestrality.

Unlike other commentators (who argue that Meillassoux has failed to address Heidegger’s ontological difference¹⁰), I will focus on the first correlate in this relationship, namely Dasein. A proper interpretation of Heidegger’s Dasein, as I will explain, can show how the mutual interdependence of Dasein and Being itself can directly pave the way to what Meillassoux tries to achieve, but in a much more cumbersome and indirect way. It seems as if Meillassoux, by ignoring the way of *being* of humans, arrives at a solution that Heidegger himself had long since achieved.

In the following, we will have to see in more detail which arguments Meillassoux uses to find a way towards the “great outdoors.” In the next step, we will discuss where Heidegger locates nature and reality against the background of the Dasein-Being correlation. Finally, it should be made clear whether Heidegger’s correlation of Dasein and Being can be reconciled with statements about the ancestral or whether it stands in implacable opposition to such statements.

² Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 10.

³ Meillassoux, *Time without Becoming*, 1.

⁴ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶ Meillassoux, *Time without Becoming*, 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Gratton, *Speculative Realism*, 41.

¹⁰ See, for example, Bruno, “Meillassoux, Correlationism and the Ontological Difference.”

2 Meillassoux and the Path to the Great Outdoors

Meillassoux's central question is, "How is empirical knowledge of a world anterior to all experience possible?"¹¹ To answer this question, Meillassoux offers a brief historical review: he sees the first approach to such a naturalistic view of the world in the Galilean-Copernican revolution. It was first the "mathematized science" that made it possible to describe a world "*separable* from man."¹² Thus, it was mathematized science that led to "*the decentring of thought relative to the world.*"¹³

Meillassoux sees the first philosophical argument for such an approach in the philosophy of Descartes. To be able to think about an "absolute" (something totally separable from human knowledge), Descartes notes the need for some kind of anchor point, which he believes can be found in God. According to Descartes, God, as the most perfect being, also includes His own existence. It would be a contradiction to think about God and at the same time to deny His existence. Therefore, by thinking about God, human beings gain access to an absolute reality, and from this follows the thought that because God does not betray us, three-dimensional bodies outside ourselves can be accurately described by geometry and arithmetic: "Any aspect of a body ... can exist absolutely outside me."¹⁴ Descartes derives the necessity of mathematical science by assuming that God necessarily exists.¹⁵ Hence, the decentricity of thought in the Galilean-Copernican revolution finds its justification in God as necessarily existing.

It is Kant who provides the most decisive refutation of this conclusion. According to Kant, the concept of being is not a real predicate.¹⁶ In the words of Meillassoux, "No determination of an entity can tell us *a priori* whether this entity exists or not."¹⁷ From Kant's perspective, in order to assert that a being has existence, we require experience, which is constrained. We can, through our minds, structure and categorize sense data, but we cannot say anything beyond the limits of our experience. Meillassoux emphasizes that Kant is a correlationist only in a restricted sense. Although Kant maintains that "the conditions of the possibility of experience in general are at the same time conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience"¹⁸ those conditions are only necessary but not sufficient conditions of the objects of our experience. Kant's categories need sense data in order to apply, and sense data are generated by things in themselves that affect our appearances. Human understanding can think of "an object in itself" as the "cause of appearance (thus not itself appearance)."¹⁹

Nevertheless, Meillassoux's comprehension of correlationism is more expansive than this. He asserts that things in themselves are not only beyond human experience, but also unthinkable. He draws upon a thesis that he describes as "strong correlationism"²⁰: "to think something absolute is to think an absolute for-us, and hence not to think anything absolute."²¹

If this is indeed the case, and if such a robust correlationism is incompatible with any form of the "absolute in general,"²² human access to a mind-independent reality is corrupted. Furthermore, the Galilean-Copernican revolution, in its attempt to decentre our thoughts relative to the world, would be on the wrong track.

Therefore, Meillassoux sees his main task as "*uncover[ing] an absolute necessity that does not reinstate any form of absolutely necessary entities.*"²³ Meillassoux attempts to show that the thesis of (strong) correlationism,

¹¹ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 123.

¹² Ibid., 115.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 30.

¹⁵ Ibid., 29–31.

¹⁶ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 627.

¹⁷ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 32.

¹⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 197.

¹⁹ Ibid., B 344.

²⁰ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 37.

²¹ Ibid., 51. We will come back to this important point later.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 34.

in order to justify its own position, must ultimately presuppose precisely what it seeks to refute, namely, a realistic point of view.

Upon initial examination, two potential implications may be drawn from the thesis of correlationism. The first consequence appears to be relatively straightforward: if any notion of an absolute is tantamount to a notion of an absolute for us, then the assertion of pre-Kantian metaphysics to have provided evidence for the existence of an absolute entity is flawed. Nevertheless, there is a less trivial consequence that remains to be addressed. For those who adhere to the tenets of strong correlationism, it is similarly impossible to demonstrate the impossibility of the thought of an absolute. With regard to this aspect, Meillassoux presents a cryptic sentence: “It is unthinkable that the unthinkable be impossible.”²⁴ Consequently, it is not possible to prove the existence of an absolute entity (which was the goal of Descartes) or the non-existence of such an entity. Consequently, the strong correlationist is not an atheist, but an agnostic. In this gap in thinking, which was initially created by strong correlationism, some space has now been created for faith. In light of the above considerations, it can be argued that the Absolute, which is neither provable nor disprovable, can only be accepted on the basis of faith.

Meillassoux endeavours to propose an alternative approach. Rather than relying on fideism, he aims to grasp the possibility of a mind-independent reality that does not necessitate the assumption of an absolute entity. This approach avoids the constraints of dogmatic metaphysics. In order to demonstrate this proof, it is necessary to return to the aforementioned central thesis of strong correlationism: “to think something absolute is to think an absolute for us, and hence not to think anything absolute.”²⁵ According to Meillassoux, two aspects in particular must be taken into consideration, namely, “a realist absolute ... cannot pass through the meshes of the correlation (first principle of the strong model)” and “a correlationist absolute (one that is subjectivist, i.e., idealist or vitalist) cannot pass through the meshes of facticity (second principle of strong correlationism).”²⁶

The initial premise is derived from the tenet of strong correlationism, which posits that a realist absolute thought for us cannot be anything absolute. The second aspect needs to be explained in more detail. What does Meillassoux mean by the “meshes of facticity”? To illustrate this point, he presents the following examples²⁷: The initial two examples illustrate the contrasting perspectives of two dogmatics (noncorrelationists) on the future of humanity. One of the two dogmatics, a Christian, espouses the belief in the existence of the afterlife. In contrast, the atheist dogmatic is convinced that human life is ultimately terminated upon death. The correlationist, however, who does not posit either the provability of God’s existence or the provability of His nonexistence – and thus is agnostic – cannot, by definition, decide one way or the other. The reason for this is that it is impossible to ascertain what would occur if there were no more humans in this world. However, Meillassoux introduces a third party into the discussion: the speculative idealist. According to this figure, since the human mind cannot think of itself as nonexistent at all without coming into contradiction, it must be immortal. As long as the possibility of our own nonbeing is understood as a correlate of our own thinking, we cannot think of our own annihilation without contradicting ourselves. For the speculative idealist, if an in-itself that is mind-independent is contradictory, then an in-itself that differs from the for-us is impossible.²⁸

Meillassoux proffers a counterpoint, noting that “the unthinkable can only draw us to our inability to think otherwise, rather than to the absolute impossibility of being wholly otherwise.”²⁹ To refute the speculative idealist, the correlationist must claim that there is something outside of thought, even if that outside is radically inaccessible. But this, in turn, leads to the assumption that the correlationist must think of her own capacity-not-to-be as a capacity that is not a capacity of her own thinking:

²⁴ Ibid., 41.

²⁵ Ibid., 51.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 55–6.

²⁸ Ibid., 56.

²⁹ Ibid., 44.

In order to think myself as mortal, as the atheist does – and hence as capable of not being – I must think my capacity-not-to-be as an absolute possibility, for if I think this possibility as a correlate of my thinking, if I maintain that the possibility of my not-being only exists as a correlate of my act of thinking the possibility of my not-being, then *I can no longer conceive the possibility of my not-being*, which is precisely the thesis defended by the idealist.... In other words, in order to refute subjective idealism, I must grant that my possible annihilation is thinkable as something that is not just the correlate of my thought of this annihilation.³⁰

In order to remain true to her own commitment (to the unthinkable of the in-itself), the correlationist cannot a priori exclude the possibility of the unthinkable and must therefore assume the factuality of the correlative circle: “It is because we can conceive of the absolute possibility that the ‘in-itself’ would be other than the ‘for-us’ that the correlationist argument can have any efficacy.”³¹

Consequently, Meillassoux strives for the de-absolutization of the correlative circle itself.³² The claim that a correlationist absolute cannot pass through the meshes of facticity means that there are no necessary grounds on which such a correlation must exist. To avoid absolutizing the correlative relation of the for-us and the in-itself, the correlationist must assume the facticity of the correlation.

However, if the absolute possibility that the “in-itself” could be something other than the “for-us” can be *conceived*, does not Meillassoux himself stipulate a new form of absolute, thus missing the target of correlationism? The answer is in the affirmative. But we have to see that Meillassoux’s absolute varies completely from the absolute as conceived by the speculative idealist. While the speculative idealist emphasizes the absolute necessity of correlational forms, the strong correlationist, on the other hand, places greater emphasis on “the irremediable facticity of the correlational forms.”³³ Meillassoux concludes that “for once one has refused any possibility of demonstrating the absolute necessity of these forms, it is impossible to proscribe the possibility that there could be an in-itself that differs fundamentally from what is given to us.”³⁴ Meillassoux’s absolute differs radically from the absolute of the speculative idealist as well as from the absolute of dogmatic metaphysics: “The absolute is the absolute impossibility of a necessary being.”³⁵ Finally, Meillassoux concludes, that “in other words, it is possible to establish, through indirect demonstration, the absolute necessity of the contingency of everything.”³⁶

In his work *After Finitude*, Meillassoux poses a significant question that remains unanswered: namely, how can we extrapolate from the absolute necessity of contingency to “the possibility of mathematics describing a world without humanity”?³⁷ However, by demonstrating that the in-itself is essentially independent of human thought, Meillassoux believes he has laid the foundation for such an extrapolation. My question, however, is whether such an indirect proof is necessary at all. To summarize, Meillassoux’s starting point for his indirect proof is the central thesis of strong correlationism: “To think something absolute is to think an absolute for-us and *hence* not to think anything absolute.”³⁸

It is imperative to ascertain whether this conclusion is indeed substantiated. Is human thought really not capable of thinking what is radically different from its own thinking without destroying it in its otherness? If this were not the case, then Meillassoux’s indirect proof would be rendered obsolete. If we could show that thinking would disclose an “absolute” without making it disappear in the process of the disclosure, we would be confronted with a radically different scenario: instead of a complex indirect proof for the existence of the absolute, we would have some direct evidence of its very existence.³⁹ This, however, requires

³⁰ Ibid., 57.

³¹ Ibid., 61.

³² Ibid., 52.

³³ Ibid., 38.

³⁴ Ibid., 38–9.

³⁵ Ibid., 60.

³⁶ Ibid., 62.

³⁷ Brassier et al., *Collapse*, 331.

³⁸ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 51; emphasis added.

³⁹ Similar arguments can also be found in Harman’s book *Quentin Meillassoux. Philosophy in the Making*. Rather than relying on “the supposed strength of the correlationist argument” (Harman, *Philosophy in the Making*, 139), Harman “does not find the point

a complete change of perspective on what it means to be a thinking and understanding “subject.” In the following, we will discuss where Heidegger locates beings in themselves against the backdrop of the Dasein-Being correlation.

3 Dasein’s Transcendence and the Discovery of the Present-at-Hand

At first glance, Meillassoux’s prognosis that Heidegger’s thinking is itself a type of correlationism seems to be justified. This is what Heidegger thinks: “Being ‘is’ only in the understanding of those entities to whose Being something like an understanding of Being belongs.”⁴⁰ At the same time, however, Heidegger has repeatedly emphasized that entities (in contrast to Being itself) can also be “independent” of human existence. Two theses from the *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic* are given here as examples: “1. Beings are in themselves the kinds of beings they are, and in the way they are, even if, for example, Dasein does not exist, 2. Being ‘is’ not, but being is there [es gibt], insofar as Dasein exists.”⁴¹

Such statements by Heidegger have led to some misunderstandings and have given rise to a controversial debate that I cannot fully describe within the limited scope of this paper. For example, Olafson assumes an equivocation in Heidegger’s concept of being,⁴² whereas others⁴³ have attempted to smooth the apparent contradiction between the two theses by interpreting the Being mentioned in the second thesis as the intelligibility of beings. Such an interpretation, of course, leads to a trivialization of the problem addressed in the two theses: that “Being” in the sense of having an “understanding of Being” can only be there insofar as “Dasein exists” is a banal statement. There are two different ways to address this issue: 1) Following William Blattner, we have to keep in mind that according to Heidegger, Being is that which “determines entities as entities.”⁴⁴ Being is *not* “by definition” “the intelligibility to us of entities.”⁴⁵ 2) When Heidegger argues that “something like being reveals itself to us in the understanding of being, an understanding that lies at the root of all comportment towards beings,”⁴⁶ the assumption of a definitional connection between being and understanding would lead to the consequence that what is revealed by the understanding of being is nothing other than the understanding of being itself. The idea that being can only be there in light of the understanding of being does not reduce being to its intelligibility.

In a nutshell, the two theses in *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic* are by no means banal; instead, they describe a tangible problem. Instead of dealing with the various attempts to solve this problem, I will try to address the problem with a fresh and unencumbered approach to Heidegger’s interpretation of how people relate to themselves and to things in the world. A good introduction to this question is Heidegger’s reaction to the question of how philosophy is able to find proof for the existence of the outside world. His answer in *Being and Time* is that “the ‘scandal of philosophy’ is not that this proof has yet to be given, but that *such proofs are*

compelling that we cannot think of something without thinking it” (Ibid., 134). Instead, he holds the same belief as I do in this article, namely that “we *can* talk about things in themselves” (Ibid.). This invalidates Meillassoux’s indirect proof: “If Strong Correlationism is impossible, then so is the philosophy of Meillassoux” (Ibid., 138). Despite these parallels with Harman, the approach in this article differs significantly from Harman’s. While Harman defines “finitude” as “not merely a special feature of human knowledge, but a general feature of relation in all its forms” (Ibid., 134), this article begins with an interpretation of what it means to be human in the first place. How this methodological approach, despite its limitation to Heidegger, is nevertheless compatible with Harman’s central idea that “the withdrawal of one object from another is not produced by a magical entity called the mind” (Ibid., 136), I will discuss below.

⁴⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 228.

⁴¹ Heidegger, *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, 153.

⁴² Olafson (*Heidegger and the Philosophy of Mind*, 141) writes: “There are *two* concepts of being – one familiar and the other new.” See also Carman, *Heidegger’s Analytic*, 200.

⁴³ Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 255; and later Carman, *Heidegger’s Analytic*, 15.

⁴⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 25.

⁴⁵ Blattner, “Is Heidegger a Kantian Idealist,” 189.

⁴⁶ Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 16.

*expected and attempted again and again.*⁴⁷ From the point of view of the Cartesian separation of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, a persistent question arises as to how a thinking and feeling “subject” can know that such “objects” exist at all. Heidegger’s unique approach to these questions is that he first asks what these objects are, how they are, and which kind of “being” they have. Heidegger simultaneously asks who this thinking and feeling “subject” actually is. Starting with the objects, Heidegger asks what these objects are that we encounter first, and for the most part. These are precisely the objects of everyday life: a hammer, a popular example from Heidegger, or the gear stick of a gear shift. Heidegger describes such items as “ready-to-hand.” What distinguishes the ready-to-hand is twofold: on the one hand, it is the fact that the purpose for which it was designed remains in the everyday practical handling of the “ready-to-hand” in the background and is not in the foreground of our attention. For example, if we drive a car from one place to another and if we use the gear stick (to change gears) whilst driving, we will not notice that use at all. We are actually somewhere else with our thoughts, but definitely not with the gear stick. For Heidegger, this means that the “way of being” of the ready-to-hand has the tendency to withdraw itself, and the character of the “in-order-to” of every item is not perceived as such in a normal activity. Therefore, in our everyday way of dealing with things, we overlook the way they are – their readiness-to-hand. It is of specific significance, however, that it is precisely this readiness-to-hand that we encounter first and most predominantly.

However, the ready-to-hand is distinguished by a second characterization, namely, the fact that no ready-to-hand exists in isolation but is always embedded in a broader context. Every piece of equipment has a function; it works to fulfil some tasks. A hammer, to give one of Heidegger’s common examples, is useful for the sake of constructing a house; constructing a house is, in turn, an activity for the sake of having a shelter against bad weather. All those different in-order-to’s can finally be traced back to the phenomenon of the world (called the “whole of meaningful connections”⁴⁸), which is the ultimate horizon against which entities become accessible *as entities*. Heidegger also speaks of a peculiar familiarity with things against the background of which, first of all, a closed “referential totality” comes to the fore.⁴⁹ He interprets the world as “the manifestness of beings as such as a whole.”⁵⁰ In contrast to animals, for which Heidegger grants having an “own relation”⁵¹ to other things, only humans have access to “beings as such.”⁵²

It is, as we shall see, in the slipstream of this meaningfulness of the world that we will recognize the sense in which and the extent to which Beings in themselves (independent of Dasein) can be encountered at all. Before we go into this problem in more detail, let us take a look back at the two theses of *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*. Against the background of the analysis of the ready-to-hand, thesis 2 has an unproblematic meaning. It is obvious that there can only be pieces of equipment as long as Dasein exists. Without Dasein, there would be no hammers, guns, or glasses. To put it in an exaggerated nutshell, we can say that Being (in the sense of thesis 2) means nothing other than being relevant for Dasein. But what about those entities that can also “be” if there is no Dasein around (as formulated in thesis 1)? It is obvious that this Dasein-independent existence of beings is not the same that Heidegger is trying to bring out in thesis 2. Thus, what way of being may be attributed to those entities? In my opinion, it is their presence-at-hand (Vorhandenheit), which I have left out so far. Presence-at-hand is, in Heidegger’s words, the ontological mode of things as detached, isolated entities.

In this context, however, the following should be noted: As Padui (*Heidegger on the Nonsense of Objects*) points out in a revealing paper, Heidegger envisages two different uses of the term “presence-at-hand”: “one of

⁴⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 249.

⁴⁸ Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, 210.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 187.

⁵⁰ Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 284.

⁵¹ Ibid., 198.

⁵² Ibid., 269. I read this human/animal distinction as an attempt to describe the ontological status of two different kinds of beings – one is labeled “animal” and is “poor in world” (ibid., 186), and the other is labeled “human” and is “world-forming” (ibid., 274). It is, I think, still an open question how and where this world-forming structure is physically implemented (in a carbon-based material or something else). An ontological description of a being that has such a world-forming structure should not be confused with its ontic realization.

the innerworldly existence of objectified entities and another regarding their bare existence independent of their worldliness.”⁵³ While the former use implies “that the *Vorhanden* is in a significant way grounded on or dependent upon Dasein, the meaningful context of the world, and our understanding of being,”⁵⁴ according to the second use *Vorhandenheit* is “a designation of the entity that is without world, independent of world.”⁵⁵ Indeed, Heidegger explicitly declares: “Extant things are beings as the kind of things they are, even if they do not become intraworldly, even if world-entry does not happen to them and there is no occasion for it at all.”⁵⁶ According to Padui, extant things before the “world-entry” are associated with the “non-rational and singular world of entities, in themselves bare of meaning or significance.”⁵⁷

It is this use of the term “*Vorhandenheit*” which is meant in the first thesis of the *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*. But how should this *Vorhandenheit*, in its independence from Dasein, supposed to be encountered by humans? Heidegger provides an answer to this in *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*. He adds a third thesis to the two already mentioned, against the background of which the first thesis should first be explained.

“3. Only insofar as existing Dasein gives itself anything like being can beings emerge in their in-themselves, i.e., can the first claim likewise be understood at all and be taken into account.”⁵⁸ If we imagine a situation in which there is no Dasein, then “there is” no being (according to thesis 2). This leads Heidegger to the conclusion in *Being and Time*: “When Dasein does not exist, ‘independence’ ‘is’ not either, nor ‘is’ the ‘in-itself’. In such a case this sort of thing can be neither understood nor not understood.... *In such a case* it cannot be said that entities are, nor can it be said that they are not.”⁵⁹ However, this does not allow us to conclude that entities are dependent on Dasein. In fact, Heidegger speaks of a dependence of being on Dasein, but not of a dependence of entities.⁶⁰ Blattner, for example, believes that Heidegger is a transcendental idealist with regard to being, but not entities. However, this argument is not as clear-cut as Blattner makes it out to be. He himself considers *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic* to be a “High-water mark” of Heidegger’s realism.⁶¹ Instead, however, he still sees a robust idealism firmly anchored in *Being and Time* in particular and also in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*. But even in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, a somewhat more differentiated picture emerges. In any case, Heidegger unflinchingly maintains that an entity is discovered just as it was before – “regardless of its uncoveredness and non-uncoveredness.”⁶² Blattner explains this obvious deviation from thesis 3 as follows. With regard to the question whether extant things are dependent on Dasein, Heidegger distinguishes between two different standpoints, described as the human and the transcendental view: “The human standpoint declines to think away the being of natural things, even though it thinks us away. It is true, however, that being does depend on us, but from the human standpoint we just *ignore* that dependence. The transcendental standpoint does not ignore that dependence; it keeps the dependence clearly fixed before it, and then draws the inevitable conclusion that we cannot answer the question we are asking.”⁶³ Blattner also refers to the human point of view as the position of “empirical realism.”⁶⁴ The empirical realist takes for granted the being of entities prior to their entry into the world. The transcendental idealist counters that it is only *within* the conceptual framework available to the human mind that we can attribute being to such entities. If we think away Dasein, then no being can be attributed to things-in-themselves.

53 Padui, “Heidegger on the Nonsense of Objects,” 495.

54 Ibid., 502.

55 Ibid., 503.

56 Heidegger, *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, 194.

57 Padui, “Heidegger on the Nonsense of Objects,” 511.

58 Heidegger, *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, 153.

59 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 255.

60 According to Blattner (“Is Heidegger a Kantian Idealist,” 198), the statement that entities do not exist if Dasein does not exist has no truth value.

61 Ibid., 194.

62 Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 220.

63 Blattner, “Is Heidegger a Kantian Idealist,” 193.

64 Ibid., 186.

In this article, I take a different approach. My question is: Can we not think of the being of extant things prior to Dasein – even if we do not ignore the dependence of being on Dasein? Ultimately, this would amount to reconciling correlationism and realism. The question is, what is the scope of the “human point of view”? We need to consider whether it is not possible, in principle, within the human understanding of being, to take a standpoint that transcends the very human view and allows us to relate to things that already existed when there was no Dasein. How this might be possible, however, depends entirely on what ontological meaning can be ascribed to Heidegger’s Dasein in the first place. How can Dasein encounter extant things bare of meaning at all, if it owes its access to things primarily to the fact that it is familiar with a world (the whole of meaningfulness)?

4 The Scope of the Human Perspective

To answer this question, we have to consider again what the way of being of the ready-to-hand truly is. First, what makes a piece of equipment something ready-to-hand is its embeddedness in an equipmental whole. However, it is precisely this characteristic of the available that has the tendency to remain invisible in the process of dealing with it. It only becomes visible when there are disruptions in our everyday activities – if the ready-to-hand breaks, gets lost or is in the way.⁶⁵ Only when there is a disturbance does the ready-to-hand stand out by itself. The functionality of the gear shift in a manual transmission only becomes noticeable when the gear shift breaks. Two events happen at the same time: In the moment when the available is deprived of its referential context (losing its functionality in the course of the disturbance), it is exactly that referential context that announces itself and, at the same time, the things deprived of their relevance are encountered as something present-at-hand. Here, however, we have to be careful: the moment of disturbance elaborated in §16 of *Being in Time*, in which the presence-at-hand shows up for the first time, requires a substantial addition. Such disruptions in the referential context are only a contingent possibility of encountering the present-at-hand. Basically, Dasein could exist in a world in which such disturbances would never occur. Accordingly, the experience of the present-at-hand would not be an existential-ontological possibility of Dasein.

But how can Dasein encounter presence-at-hand in a more basic and unavoidable manner? Here, we have to see that the sheer “presence-at-hand” is encountered not only in disturbances during our practical handling of things but also equally in the mood of anxiety (as described in §40 of *Being and Time*). For example, Heidegger notes that “anxiety is anxious in the face of the ‘nothing’ of the world; but this does not mean that in anxiety we experience something like the absence of what is present-at-hand within-the-world. The present-at-hand must be encountered in just *such* a way that it does *not* have *any* involvement *whatsoever*, but can show itself in an empty mercilessness.”⁶⁶ Let us recapitulate: in the mood of anxiety, we encounter the present-at-hand “in an empty mercilessness.”⁶⁷ It is important to see the decisive difference between the disturbances described by Heidegger in §16 of *Being and Time* and the phenomenological description of anxiety as it is given in §40: Whereas the former describes some breaks within the referential totality, it is the referential totality itself that seems to withdraw in the mood of anxiety.⁶⁸ That withdrawal of the whole of

⁶⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 102–3.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 393.

⁶⁷ This interpretation can also be supported by a remark of Heidegger in “What is Metaphysics,” where he asks the question: What is actually annihilated at the moment of this annihilation when it is triggered by anxiety? The entities? No! They remain the same as they were before anxiety began its work. What is annihilated is not the entities themselves, but rather our familiarity with these entities. Although Heidegger does not explicitly explain it at this point, what remains for entities in the process of annihilation is their presence-at-hand (Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics,” 90).

⁶⁸ What comes to the fore in disturbances is not the world as such; it is a specific equipment *with regard* to its worldly character. Readiness-to-hand does not vanish completely; it reappears in the moment of its demise, “and it is precisely here that the worldly character of the ready-to-hand shows itself too” (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 104). Ratcliffe (“There can be no Cognitive Science of

all meaningful connections is, in turn, characterized by a specific Janus-headed nature: On the one hand (exactly in the moment of the withdrawal of the referential whole), “the *world as world* is disclosed first and foremost by anxiety”⁶⁹ but on the other hand, entities show up as present-at-hand deprived of their meaning (the present-at-hand in its empty mercilessness). It should be noted that anxiety is not simply a possibility of access to an already existing totality of things; on the contrary, it is only at the moment when our familiarity with beings slips away that being becomes manifest as such as a whole.⁷⁰

But now to the all-important question: as long as we interpret the experience of the presence-at-hand as the deprivation of our familiarity with the world, we have no possibility, it seems, to even refute Meillassoux’s criticism of phenomenology. What Meillassoux is after is much more: an access to “reality as it is in itself”⁷¹ that is not only the complementary side of Dasein’s familiarity with the world. The question remains: How can a human being, by way of its involved coping in a world, ever encounter a Being that has a stand in itself? A hardcore realist could still object that due to the dialectic of familiarity and unfamiliarity, the latter is still linked to the human experience: without Dasein, there would be no unfamiliarity, and without unfamiliarity, there would be no presence-at-hand. To achieve such an encounter with a Being that has a stand in itself, we first have to definitively cross out all our access capabilities towards things in themselves. As long as we are not capable of leaving all our familiar routes in the world behind us, there will always remain a rupture between our phenomenological access to the world and entities before their world entry. But does such an attempt not result in trying to obtain access to something that defies all our attempts to obtain access? How can we ascribe properties to things independent of our way of interacting with those properties? Dreyfus and Spinoza formulated this problem as follows: “This amounts to the seemingly paradoxical claim that we have practices for making sense of entities as independent of these very practices.”⁷² To solve this conundrum, we have to turn the tables with regard to the ontological status of Dasein – namely, to transpose that rupture into the heart of Dasein itself. What is needed to solve this puzzle is a reinterpretation of what it means to *be* human. The thread of the annihilation of all our familiar ways in the world (always lurking in the background) leads Dasein beyond all its practical activities into a domain that has long since left anthropocentrism behind. To achieve this domain, we need special experience. By relating itself to the nullity of its own existence (which happens in the mood of anxiety), Dasein is always ahead of itself.⁷³ This claim appears in several of Heidegger’s central themes. One need only think of his characterization of Dasein as being held in nothingness, of the anchoring of death in the midst of human existence and, last but not least, of the temporal interpretation of Dasein. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss all these aspects in detail. As far as temporality is concerned, the following can be said: Heidegger sees in temporality the primordial

Dasein,” 141) rightly argues that “things are presented to us as stripped to varying degrees of the significance that they previously had, as having lost something. Presence-at-hand does not escape readiness-to-hand but is a kind of abstraction from it, a removal of certain characteristics.”

69 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 232.

70 The wholeness that can be experienced through the mood of anxiety does not mean a countable number of existing entities. On the contrary, as Heidegger (*Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 193) expressively emphasizes, that wholeness is “constantly extendable.” Each newly added being fits seamlessly into the previously experienced wholeness.

71 Meillassoux, *Time without Becoming*, 6.

72 Dreyfus and Spinoza, “Coping with Things-in-Themselves,” 54.

73 Here, being ahead of oneself means anticipating one’s own non-existence. “There belongs to Dasein, as long as it is, a “not-yet” which it will be – that which is constantly still outstanding. ... In Dasein there is undeniably a constant ‘lack of totality’ which finds an end with death” (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 286). An apparently quite different interpretation of the “not yet” is found in Gallagher (“The Past, Present and Future of Time,” 97), who refers to Husserl’s “anticipatory intentionality” as follows: “In this anticipatory intentionality the appearance of the not yet is not an apprehension of an absence (Entgegenwärtigung), it is rather an apprehension of the possibilities or the affordances in the present, the anticipation of what *S can be* for my experience.” Gallagher is right: A tiger encountering the stimulus of an antelope perceives that stimulus as an opportunity to get something to eat. However, this orientation toward the antelope can only explain, in Heidegger’s terms, what the tiger’s relationship to the antelope is, but this relationship is not an access to the antelope *as a being*. (cf. Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 198). Only Dasein (by existing in its own ultimate nothingness) is capable of having access to beings as such. While the tiger grasps beings as possibilities or affordances, it lacks the capacity to understand these “possibilities as possibilities” (Ratcliffe, “There can be no Cognitive Science of Dasein,” 148).

“out-of-itself.”⁷⁴ Being out-of-itself, Dasein transcends all conceivable earlier epochs of its existence and simultaneously overtakes all epochs yet to come. As Heidegger cryptically writes, man is “a creature of distance.”⁷⁵ Dasein’s being “outside-of-itself” means not only being amidst other things but also being temporarily “stretched.”⁷⁶ Being held out into nothingness (by experiencing the utter insignificance of all intra-worldly things) constitutes the transcendence of Dasein and stretches Dasein out into a time that eludes all enpresenting but nevertheless affects Dasein *in its absence*. It is its own absence that Dasein goes through in its whole life. As Heidegger explicitly declares: “Primordial and authentic coming-to-oneself is the meaning of existing in one’s ownmost nullity.”⁷⁷ Encountering its own nothingness (in the breakdown of the meaningfulness of its world), this absence is not an external supplement to Dasein, but it is directly anchored in its own existence. If the familiarity with beings as such collapses, then beings are encountered as meaningless, irrelevant, worldless – precisely as beings before their entrance into a world. It is precisely in the voiding of the referential whole of meaningfulness that beings reveal themselves “in their full but heretofore concealed strangeness as what is radically other.”⁷⁸ In transcending all our familiar routes in the world, human beings encounter the part of things that resist all our coping practices.⁷⁹ What is discovered by Dasein, is – to use Sparrow’s words – “the weird, the strange, the uncanny.”⁸⁰ Since the manifestness of being as such as a whole only shows up at the moment of its own slipping, the following applies: there is no gap at all between an allegedly intact “inner” world and an “outer” world separated from it. The rupture occurs, as it were, in the midst of human existence.

5 Conclusion

After all those explanatory notes about Heidegger’s approach to entities before their world-entry, let us summarize to which extent and in which sense Heidegger can refer to things-in-themselves. At first glance, it seems that Heidegger would embrace a kind of *correlationism*. If Dasein is always exposed to its own annihilation, and if this annihilation paves the way for the understanding of extra-worldly entities, then the question arises whether such a view of the averted side of Dasein’s Being-in-the-World transforms that side into a correlate of human understanding. Therefore, blaming Heidegger as a correlationist, as Meillassoux has done, seems to be correct. However, we have to take a closer look at this accusation. Even if we accuse Heidegger’s concept of Dasein as a Being that (by transcending the totality of significance) comports itself to its own nothingness of being a philosophy that is caught in the correlationist circle, we should not ignore what

⁷⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 377.

⁷⁵ Heidegger, “On the Essence of Ground,” 135.

⁷⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 462.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 379. It is its own ultimate nothingness (caused by the breakdown of the referential totality) through which Dasein first reveals its own Being-in-the-World. As already indicated earlier, we must turn the screw on the ontological status of Dasein. This “turning-around” (*Kehre*) requires that Being-in-the-World be interpreted against the background of its loss of meaningfulness (and not vice versa). This loss of meaningfulness and the retreat of things into their hiddenness is not a matter of the human mind, as Heidegger explicitly emphasizes: “The ‘concealed’ and the ‘unconcealed’ are characters of the very being itself and not characteristics of the noticing or apprehending” (Heidegger, *Parmenides*, 24). This is a similar line of thought that Harman takes up in his book “Quentin Meillassoux. Philosophy in the Making.” In order to do this, however, we need a *Kehre* in Heidegger’s fundamental analysis of Dasein. Where such a turn might lead us is already hinted at by Heidegger in *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*: “But the temporal analysis is at the same time the turning-around [*Kehre*], where ontology itself expressly runs back into the metaphysical ontic in which it implicitly always remains” (Heidegger, *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, 158).

⁷⁸ Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics,” 90. Such an experience, according to Dreyfus and Spinoza, takes place almost in a mood of anxiety. It is in this mood that the world itself (the referential totality) is questioned. What emerges is the absence of all meaning – in Dreyfus and Spinoza’s words, the “strange” (Dreyfus and Spinoza, “Coping with Things-in-Themselves,” 61). They call such a breakdown of everyday coping “defamiliarization” (*ibid.*). Defamiliarization is the downside of familiarity with the world and is itself a genuine human experience.

⁷⁹ Harman, *Tool Being*, 126.

⁸⁰ Sparrow, *The End of Phenomenology*, 20.

that correlate “Dasein” actually is: As revealed by the mood of anxiety, nothingness (the absence of all significance) comes upon Dasein as something mysterious, unfamiliar, like the presence of an absence. How Dasein can relate to something that eludes all immediate access is related to the fact that it is directly affected by the total collapse of meaningfulness. It is not the case that Dasein stretches out any tentacles in order to understand the completely different aspect of its familiar dealings with things by drawing it into the shell of its mind in order to re-present it there. Being affected by the constant threat of its own annihilation, Dasein encounters the never-presentable, the negative-foil of its Being-in-the-World. The experience of one’s own annihilation is the experience of an absence – not the experience of a fact that is present in our consciousness.⁸¹

To put it as succinctly as possible: Heidegger never denies the correlative relation between Being and Dasein. Nor is he concerned with demonstrating an “outside” of the correlative circle. How, under this presupposition, it should still be possible to refer to existing things prior to Dasein is not related to the fact that he denies the correlative relation between Being and Dasein, but rather to the fact that he expands the scope of “Dasein.” The search for a way into the “Great Outdoors” only becomes necessary when, in the correlation of Dasein and being, the correlate “Dasein” is reduced to the biologically existing mammal, which has populated the earth for only a few hundred thousand years. Dasein, however, is not simply an occurrent biological object; rather, Dasein is “temporally extended” and cannot be reduced to an extant being in the here and now. As a “creature of distance” it is, so to speak, its own “not.”

The question remains, however, as to what the access to extra-worldly entities initiated by the total rupture of meaningfulness actually means. Dreyfus and Spinoza, for example, argue “that it is coherent to believe that science can in principle give us access to the functional components of the universe as they are in themselves.”⁸² They also refer to such a position as *robust realism*. Despite all reservations about a robust realism in Heidegger’s thought, they still believe that they can find some support for such an interpretation in Heidegger’s work. Heidegger’s *Angst*, however, as well as his understanding of transcendence as a “holding itself out into the nothing,”⁸³ does not “give us access to the functional components of the universe as they are in themselves.” By holding itself out into the nothing, Dasein encounters an open space in its dealing with things as available – an open space that defies all our attempts to fill in the gap with our theoretical knowledge and coping practices. This is what Heidegger says: “Every explanation, when we speak of an explanation of nature, is distinguished by its involvement in the *incomprehensible*.... Nature is ... *the incomprehensible pure and simple*. And it is the incomprehensible because it is the ‘unworlded’ world.”⁸⁴ Affected by the finitude of our own existence, we have access to the incomprehensible, and we can talk about the inexpressible.

81 Lilian Alweiss has serious doubts about whether human beings are ever capable of experiencing their own annihilation. Death, as she argues, is not at our disposal, death “overcomes us” (Alweiss, “Heidegger and the Concept of Time,” 125). Accordingly, she concludes that “death is a stranger to the world and remains foreign to all achievement (...) Death remains other to us humans” (ibid., 125). In light of these considerations, she poses the question of how Heidegger, by interpreting death as an impending possibility that “can never be turned actual” (ibid., 126) fails to provide an explanation of how Dasein can ever die. If this were the case, Heidegger would be exposed to the same objections as Meillassoux has charged against the speculative idealist. The question thus arises as to how we can *experience* our own annihilation, given that annihilation can never be actualized. Human beings, however, can experience their own annihilation (without having to achieve it) in the breakdown of the referential totality. The experience of the unfamiliar, the strange does not transform it into something familiar. The always-threatening loss of all meaningfulness is not at our disposal. Dasein is unable to create its own limitations to which it is exposed throughout its life.

82 Dreyfus and Spinoza, “Coping with Things-in-Themselves,” 50.

83 Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics,” 91.

84 Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, 217. Dreyfus and Spinoza are aware that the experience of the “incomprehensible” is not a sufficient explanation for a robust realism in Heidegger’s thought: “What the phenomenon of strangeness revealed in total breakdown supports is the sparer claim that we can make sense of nature as independent of our coping practices, and as underlying everyday things” (Dreyfus and Spinoza, “Coping with Things-in-Themselves,” 55). It is unclear to what extent the experience of the breakdown of the referential totality is an experience of the “radically other” – and not just an experience of one’s own breakdown (Ibid., 56). To rescue Heidegger’s realism, the authors refer to his concept of “formal designation” in Being and Time for determining Dasein. In order to “approach the essential structures of human being,” Heidegger requires a method for referring to kinds without prior knowledge of their essential features (Ibid., 57). However, it is problematic to transpose Heidegger’s formal designation of Dasein to occurrent things in nature. To answer the question of the extent to which the experience of the breakdown of the referential totality

But what about *empirical realism*? Empirical realism takes it for granted that things exist before they enter the human world, because it argues *from* the human point of view. But the transcendental idealist would reply: Statements about the being of entities prior to the existence of Dasein have no truth value. This would imply that we can only speak of the independence of entities from Dasein as long as Dasein is *present*. But as we have shown: Dasein lives through its own annihilation, triggered by the collapse of the referential totality. Dasein shouldn't be boiled down to just its *presence*.

Finally, let us compare how Meillassoux (in contrast to Heidegger) understands access to extra-worldly entities (the path to the great outdoors). As I explained above, Meillassoux assumes that correlationism is the correct and unavoidable starting point for the question of such access. However, in order to avoid absolutizing the correlative circle (transcending the meshes of facticity), the correlationist must assume that there is something outside of thought. In short, this means: "Just because we cannot *think* the in-self does not mean that it necessarily *does not exist*."⁸⁵ Here I agree with Harman: how can we distinguish between our inability to think the in-self and its inability to exist, assuming that the correlationist argument is on the right track? For this reason, Harman regards the speculative materialism proposed by Meillassoux as nothing more than another variant of idealism. But let's assume for the sake of argument that Meillassoux's indirect argument for an outside of thought is sound. What kind of access to the outside does he have in mind?

While Meillassoux believes to have found such access in mathematical knowledge, Heidegger's Dasein (by being "outside of itself") transcends any kind of knowledge available to us through the natural sciences. However, this realm of the "unknowable" is far more than a mere marker that merely negatively indicates the limits of our knowledge, but is itself tangible for Dasein, at least if we do not reduce human experience to its cognitive dimension. In the moods of anxiety and boredom, Dasein encounters its own nothingness as a basic condition of its own existence.

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is an experience of something radically different, it is necessary to ask more precisely: What kind of difference are we talking about? What becomes apparent through the loss of meaningfulness is the fundamental unavailability of things. Of course, this does not give us any kind of usable knowledge, and certainly not insight into the functional components of the universe. On the other hand, nature, understood as "the incomprehensible pure," is much more than a signal of the limits of our knowledge. It is more than an "obstacle for man" (Harman, *Skirmishes*, 43) outside the human mind. Dasein, being held out into nothingness, is not an occurrent subject that occasionally bumps up against the limits of reality.

⁸⁵ Harman, *Skirmishes*, 3, 26.

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