

THE LAW OF BECOMING AND THE SHACKLES OF SUFFICIENT REASON IN QUENTIN MEILLASSOUX

Thomas Sutherland

Heraclitus and the Sophists make an infernal racket.
Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*.¹

The doctrine of eternal flux—often ascribed rightly or wrongly to the ancient philosopher Heraclitus, whose image of an ever-flowing, always changing river remains one of the most enduring metaphors for the antilogical relationship between change and stability—still exercises a forceful influence over contemporary continental thought, above all as a consequence of the sustained popularity of the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, who mobilizes the law of becoming as one of the central tenets of his vectorial ontology. The focus of this essay, however, is not Heraclitus, nor Deleuze, but Quentin Meillassoux, who endeavours to avoid absolutizing the law of becoming in the manner of these prior philosophers, instead seeking to think the absolute through the *impossible necessity* of any such law.

Meillassoux terms this absolutization of contingency *hyper-chaos*: a time not of perpetual becoming, but of lawless creation and destruction, premised upon an abandonment of the principle of sufficient reason. In spite of his claims though, it is my contention that Meillassoux is unable to coherently posit the principle of unreason upon which his philosophy hinges, and as such, he is unable to escape the same problems that he criticizes in the concept of Heraclitean flux. In order to demonstrate this hypothesis, I will examine Meillassoux's critique of the aforementioned law of eternal becoming in Heraclitus and GWF Hegel, before extrapolating it out further in order to postulate its continued applicability for the philosophy of Deleuze. I will then conclude the essay with three illustrations of the ways that Meillassoux's conceptualization of hyper-chaos remains inextricable from the principle of sufficient reason that he strives to disavow.

THE LAW OF BECOMING AND THE SHACKLES OF SUFFICIENT REASON

FACTICITY, FACTIALITY, AND THE PRINCIPLE OF UNREASON

The basic characteristics of Meillassoux's speculative materialism, as laid out in *After Finitude* have been covered at great length elsewhere, especially given the attention paid to so-called *speculative realism* as a more general intellectual movement (albeit one disavowed by most of its founding members), and as such, there seems little need to rehearse them once more within this essay.² The following description is thus best understood as a reiteration of key terms for the argument that I will be proposing, rather than a general outline of Meillassoux's philosophy.

Meillassoux's project consists of a critique (but also a reframing) of the problem of *correlationism*—the presumption of a necessary correlate between thought and being, as initiated by Kant's transcendental idealism, which sought to foreclose the possibility of an absolute being thinkable through metaphysics. It is this strict anti-absolutism, rather than anti-realism, which Meillassoux views as the hallmark and lasting legacy of the Kantian tradition. That is, it is plausible (if still disputable) to argue that Kant is at the very least a metaphysical realist, as evidenced by claims such as the following:

[b]y an idealist...one must understand not someone who denies the existence of external objects of sense, but rather someone who only does not admit that it is cognized through immediate perception and infers from this that we can never be fully certain of their reality from any possible experience.³

What is denied in such a statement is not the possibility of grasping some aspect of an external reality, but rather, the possibility of a direct, metaphysical access to an absolute being against which our own finitude is measured. "Kant maintains that it is impossible to derive the forms of thought from a principle or system capable of endowing them with absolute necessity." (38)

Kant's critical project is a "weak" correlationism, Meillassoux argues, for it "does not prohibit all relation between thought and the absolute. It proscribes any knowledge of the thing-in-itself (any application of the categories to the supersensible), but maintains the thinkability of the in-itself." (35) This is then contrasted against the "strong" model of correlationism, which "maintains not only that it is illegitimate to claim that we can *know* the in-itself, but *also* that it is illegitimate to claim that we can at least *think* it." (35) Strong correlationism, he claims, is the dominant philosophical trend of the twentieth century, exemplified by the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein in the analytic tradition, and Martin Heidegger in the continental, both of whom view human subjectivity as effectively trapped within its own representations.

Meillassoux then, who situates his own *speculative* project in opposition to the critical approach of Kant, declares that "we must take up once more the injunction to know the absolute, and break with the transcendental tradition that rules out its possibility," (28) thus seeking to refute both the weak and strong forms of correlationism by demonstrating the paradoxical possibility of thinking a reality that is entirely external to the subject, and hence, cannot be thought within the thought/being correlate. This refutation is to occur not through a mere regression to the naivety of classical metaphysics, however, but instead, via a radicalization of the correlationist argument. Put simply, Meillassoux argues that the correlationist's acceptance of a reality external to the subject's cognition—the "thing-in-itself," in Kantian terms—and in particular, the possibility of a reality that is radically other in relation to the correlation between thought and being, is a tacit recognition that the subject is able to think that which is external to this correlate.

"The very idea of the difference between the in-itself and the for-us," he writes in response to the correlationist, "would never have arisen within you, had you not experienced what is perhaps human thought's most remarkable power—its capacity to access the possibility of its own non-being, and thus to *know* itself to be mortal." (59) The very fact that the correlationist is able to acknowledge the finitude of their cognization of reality—in contrast, for instance, to the speculative idealist, who claims to be able to think the absolute (hence the designation of "speculative"), but only because they absolutize the correlation itself—is demonstrative of

the way in which correlationism elides its own ability to think the absolute, in the form of a radical otherness. Or to put it another way, the only way to conceive of correlationism in coherent and non-contradictory terms is to acknowledge not only that the subject *can* think the absolute, but that correlationism is dependent upon this fact, for if one could not think the absolutely other, then accordingly, one could also not posit a thing-in-itself distinct from the thing-for-us.

This absolute is precisely the recognition that the aforementioned correlation is not necessary, and that as such, things could otherwise than they are for-us. This is what Meillassoux refers to as the *facticity* of the correlation: it is not that we can prove that things *are* otherwise, for this would require the kind of transcendent metaphysical unveiling that is still foreclosed within his system, but rather, that we *cannot* prove the *impossibility* of this otherness. Facticity is the principle of “un-reason”: absolute contingency—and thus the absolute absence of sufficient reason—“thought solely on account of our inability to gain access to the absolute ground of what is.” (42) This leads directly to his principle of *facticity*: “the non-facticity of facticity,” (79) and thus the absolute necessity of nothing other than contingency. In other words, whereas pre-critical philosophy sought to demonstrate an ultimate and necessary ground of existence through which the absolute could be thought, Meillassoux’s speculative materialism instead claims to be able to think the absolute through thinking the *impossibility* of such necessity.

“Our absolute, in effect,” posits Meillassoux, “is nothing other than an extreme form of chaos, a *hyper-Chaos*, for which nothing is or would seem to be, impossible, not even the unthinkable.” (64) This hyper-chaos, following the principle of factuality, is the thought of a time that exceeds all time—a *virtual* time; a time completely incommensurable with that concept as we normally understand it. Hyper-chaos, it is important to note, is not simply a figuration of human intellectual finitude in the face of an absolute being that necessarily exceeds it; on the contrary, rather than “representing our incapacity to discover the ultimate reason of things,” it instead is posited as “our capacity to discover their ultimate absence of reason, identified with an unlimited power of time.”⁴

Hyper-chaos is, in other words, a time completely evacuated of the principle of sufficient reason—“according to which for every thing, every fact, and every occurrence, there must be a reason why it is thus and so rather than otherwise” (33)—in which beings, worlds, and even physical laws can be created and destroyed without meaning or purpose. It is worth noting that Jon Roffe has previously criticized Meillassoux for positioning this hyper-chaos as somehow beyond time in the usual sense of the word, arguing that “Meillassoux’s hyper-chaos *cannot* destroy time; it cannot even coherently be thought as the ground of time, since it is in fact time, taken in this minimal differential sense, that grounds the possibility of any otherwise, and any identity.”⁵ The possibility of change, Roffe suggests, is necessarily predicated upon a moment other than that which is present in which such alterity may be established, and this is nothing other than time.

Although I think that this is correct, I respectfully disagree that this argument is contrary to Meillassoux’s intentions (in regard to the specific question of the nature of hyper-chaos *qua* time; I will show in the third section that this problem still remains in regard to Meillassoux’s engagement with the question of sufficient reason.) The ambivalence of the claim that hyper-chaos is “something akin to Time” (64) [in the original French: “*quelque chose comme un Temps*”] would appear to be something of a red herring, given that he continues to describe it as a form of time in subsequent passages.⁶ This is further clarified and supported by later work, in which he states quite unambiguously that “facticity as absolute must be considered as time, *but a very special time*.”⁷ Hyper-chaos it would seem, is not merely equivalent to time, but *is* time, albeit one distinct from any physical laws. What it *is* compared against, however, is *becoming*; or more precisely, “the traditional vision according to which becoming is only thinkable as governed by immutable laws,” as opposed to “a becoming within which laws themselves would be contingent.”⁸ There are two aspects to Meillassoux’s critique of becoming as it is usually conceptualized: the first relates to his distinction between potentiality and virtuality, whereas the second follows his rejection of the ontological surety of all laws except that of factuality itself.

THE LAW OF BECOMING AND THE SHACKLES OF SUFFICIENT REASON

From Greek antiquity onward, Meillassoux argues, “one conception, and one only, of becoming, has always imposed itself upon us,” in which time merely actualizes a set of already-existing potentialities.⁹ It is this particular sense of becoming—possible becoming—that Meillassoux seeks to displace through his concept of hyper-chaos, which he still characterizes as a form of both time and becoming, but specifically a virtual becoming—virtuality in this case referring to “the property of every set of cases of emerging within a becoming which is not dominated by any pre-constituted totality of possibles.”¹⁰ Such a virtual becoming transcends the determinate potentialities of all traditional conceptions of time, for it may bring forth any entity, regardless of whether or not it is contained within a certain set of possibilities, as long as that entity is not contradictory. Becoming, in the sense that philosophers from Aristotle onward have conceived of time, is therefore a product of hyper-chaos, which is “a Time capable of destroying even becoming itself by bringing forth, perhaps forever, fixity, stasis, and death.” (64) It is this question of becoming, and its relationship to hyper-chaos, which will drive the remainder of this essay.

DIFFERENCE AND IDENTITY IN HERACLITUS HEGEL

The distinction between possibility and virtuality in becoming will be returned to in the following section; for the moment, however, I wish to focus expressly upon Meillassoux’s critique of the Heraclitean doctrine of eternal flux—“the eternal law of becoming,” as he describes it—which he then contrasts against “the eternal and lawless possible becoming of every law” by which hyper-chaos can be thought. Hyper-chaos is, following this distinction, a becoming in the specific sense that it is a time out of which things may become. Such becoming, however, is never guaranteed, for it is just as contingent as any other law (other than that of contingency itself, following the principle of factuality): it could be transformed into the Eleatics’ vision of an entirely motionless, eternal *kosmos* at any moment, albeit with the qualifier that this could once again be altered at any moment. Whilst things *may* change in this hyper-chaos, there is no *necessity* for them to do so.

It is for this reason that Meillassoux makes the explicit distinction between Heraclitus’ flux and his own hyper-chaos. Heraclitus is, of course, generally regarded as the first philosopher to posit a universe in a state of perpetual change: his famously gnomic river metaphor—“upon those who step into the same rivers, different and again different waters flow”¹¹—is construed by the philosophers of antiquity as presenting an image of the *kosmos* as nothing but motion and change, with being as merely an empty abstraction.¹² Over the course of the twentieth century, however, a number of thinkers have called this understanding into question. Most notably, Heidegger claims in regard to the doctrine of eternal flux that “this conception of Heraclitus’ doctrine is utterly foreign to the Greek,” suggesting instead that what Heraclitus teaches is that being and becoming are not necessarily mutually exclusive.¹³

Although I would be inclined to agree with Heidegger here, particularly when taking into account Heraclitus’ other fragments which would seem to reinforce this notion of an aporetic tension between being and becoming, rather than an absolute primacy of the latter, for the purposes of this essay, it is more important to focus upon the concept of Heraclitean flux as typically understood. It is this that Meillassoux refers to when he speaks of “Heraclitean time”, and likewise in the cases of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Deleuze—the three other key philosophers to be discussed here. In short, I wish to explore in more detail the way in which Meillassoux implicitly positions his speculative materialism in opposition to the metaphysics of flux—very common within contemporary continental philosophy—which, in a reversal of the traditional Parmenidean/Platonic formulation, asserts the primacy of becoming over being.

Meillassoux’s critique of Heraclitus, and “the ‘*stabilist*’ illusion of sensible becoming” (83) which is associated with his philosophy, is on first impression quite simple. Claiming to follow in the footsteps of David Hume’s scepticism regarding adequate proof of causation, he argues that we can never demonstrate the necessity of laws, regardless of how universal they may appear, for according to the principle of factuality, the possibility must remain that they could change at any moment. This is not to say that they *will* change; merely that it is impossible to state that they could not. Hence, given that “Heraclitean becoming is... like all physical time,

governed by specific laws—laws of transformation which never change,” Meillassoux views its outlook as fundamentally incoherent, given that it posits a necessary being—the being of becoming, as Deleuze often puts it—as an absolute ground for reality.¹⁴ In other words, where Heraclitean flux is premised upon a fixed law of becoming, which remains under the aegis of the principle of sufficient reason by guaranteeing constant change in every aspect of the universe except for the law itself—and thus providing an indisputable causal origin for all change—Meillassoux by contrast offers no law, no ground, no necessary being: hyper-chaos is the necessary impossibility of such entities.

It is in reference to Hegel, however, that Meillassoux’s larger critique of this eternal law of becoming is oriented. Hegel, of course, in what is probably his best-known logical (as opposed to historical) argument, co-opts the Heraclitean doctrine of flux for his own purposes, claiming that as “the first concrete determination of thought, becoming is also the first genuine one. In the history of philosophy it is the system of Heraclitus that corresponds to this stage of the logical Idea.”¹⁵ “The truth of being and nothing alike,” he goes on to argue, “is the *unity* of both of them; this unity is *becoming*.”¹⁶ What this means is that for Hegel, being and non-being are both merely “empty abstractions,” which can only be understood in relation to each other: being is nothing, for there is nothing that can be spoken of which is not being, and likewise, non-being is being, for how can it be spoken of if it is *not*?¹⁷ It is in the sublation of these two categories that becoming, as the conceptual unity of the dialectical movement itself emerges: being emerges out of nothingness, and inevitably passes back into it.

For Meillassoux’s purposes, the problem with Hegel’s account is that his affirmation of the metaphysical reality of contradiction—that is, the fact that the dialectical movement itself operates on the simultaneous being and non-being of becoming—is not compatible with his simultaneous valorization of Heraclitean flux, “in which every thing ceaselessly becomes other than it is, and wherein being passes ceaselessly into non-being, and non-being into being.” (69) This, he argues, is because a maximally contradictory entity “cannot become other than it is *because there would be no alterity for it in which to become*.” (69) Hegel’s presentation of the doctrine of eternal flux, in other words, is as Eleatic as it is Heraclitean, because this contradictory entity is “always-already whatever it is not” (70). Being is already non-being, and as such, it cannot actually become, for becoming necessitates becoming-*other*, and yet this entity, which contains alterity within itself, is *already* other. “Hegel was not the thinker of the sovereignty of becoming,” Meillassoux argues, “but on the contrary, the thinker of absolute identity, of the identity of identity and difference.” (70)

“The only possibility of reintroducing difference into being,” it is suggested, “and thereby a conceivable becoming, would be by no longer allowing oneself the right to make contradictory statements about an entity.” (70) This therefore constitutes the second half of his principle of factuality, which I have already alluded to briefly: on the one hand, he rejects the principle of sufficient reason, so that beings may be created *ex nihilo*, supposed laws may just vanish without warning, etc., whilst on the other, he affirms the necessity of the principle of non-contradiction, for absolute facticity could not operate in the presence of a contradictory entity, which would not contain the potential to become-other. As a consequence, the principle of non-contradiction is an absolute ontological truth because:

it is necessary that what is determined in such a way as to be *capable of becoming*, and of being subsequently determined in *some other* way. It is necessary that this be this and not that, or anything else whatsoever, precisely in order to ensure that this can become that or anything else whatsoever.
(71)

Non-contradiction is therefore the ultimate predicate of contingency, for the existence of any contradictory entity would challenge the “*omnipotence of chaos*.” (71)

If we think back to Heraclitus then (or at the very least, to the argument that he is purported to have made), we already know that the problem with his characterization of the river metaphor is that the guarantee of change is in itself demonstrative of stability: there is one thing that can be known for under the circumstances of absolute

THE LAW OF BECOMING AND THE SHACKLES OF SUFFICIENT REASON

becoming, that is that there is nothing but change. Everything becomes except becoming itself, and thus, a perdurable being remains the absolute. Moreover, its becoming could not have begun at a particular moment in time, for that would necessitate the existence of a state of non-being from which it came-to-be, nor could it plausibly end, given that this would mean that it had come-to-be, and thus, it must be eternal. Yet such a state of eternal becoming could not actually be regarded as one of becoming at all, for there is no alterity – no past or future – from which it could possibly differentiate itself. As such, it would seem logical to suggest that the incompatibilities between Meillassoux’s hyper-chaos and Heraclitus’ flux go deeper than just the former’s refusal to admit the eternal necessity of any law.

The paradox of Heraclitus’ river is that the very absoluteness of his claim is undermined *by* its absoluteness: it is impossible to posit a world entirely in becoming, because in order to be constant this becoming itself doesn’t *become*, but *is*. It is not only, however, that the constancy of absolute becoming necessitates the being of becoming, but that one could not conceive of the category of absolute becoming without an already-existing *arche*-being to be posited as absence. To speak of absolute becoming is to constantly disavow that which the coherency of the concept is predicated upon. The same of course, can be said for the category of absolute being: Parmenides, for instance—the first of the Eleatics, and a contemporary of Heraclitus—was only able to conceive of the eternal oneness of truth in relation to the becoming of sensory data, even whilst he persisted in positing the former as originary and the latter as mere illusory opinion. So in other words, Heraclitus’ river, if taken as a metaphor for cosmic time, fails the test of non-contradiction which Meillassoux demands as a basic criterion for thinking the absolute.

To speak not of becomings, but of becoming as a singular, universal, and eternal principle, is to introduce a contradictory entity that may be logically conceivable (that is, it is conceivable as long it is premised upon the *arche*-being that undermines its own claim to absoluteness), but is not *rational* and *factitial* in the manner that Meillassoux presents these terms. Anyone familiar with Heraclitus’ fragments would of course be aware that he himself seems fairly untroubled by any need to adhere to the principle of non-contradiction, given that so many of his aphorisms end in *aporia*. For Heraclitus, writes Maurice Blanchot:

[e]ach sentence is a cosmos, a minutely calculated arrangement whose terms are in relations of extreme tension, never indifferent to their place or figure, but rather disposed as though aiming at a secret Difference they do no more than indicate by showing, in the form of a measure, the changes and visible conversions of which the sentence is the isolated site.¹⁸

For Meillassoux, to the contrary, the notion of such difference contained within a single entity is merely an abstraction and an illusion: the only way in which we might actually think the absolute is to abandon such dialecticism—as emphasized, of course, by Hegel, whose absolutization of the principle of sufficient reason led to him abandoning that of non-contradiction—in favour of a stringent appeal to the absolute contingency (i.e. unreason) of hyper-chaos.

ETERNAL RECURRENCE IN NIETZSCHE AND DELEUZE

Hegel is not the most recent continental figure to embrace the (pseudo-)Heraclitean doctrine of eternal flux, however: both Nietzsche and Deleuze, probably two of Hegel’s best known detractors, also see great value in this concept. Meillassoux, it should be noted, has discussed the philosophy of Deleuze previously, but as far as I am aware has not engaged with the specific question of becoming in relation to his work.¹⁹ Given that, as Todd May observes, Deleuze’s conceptualization of becoming can “be seen, from the right angle, to contain in germ the entirety of his philosophical perspective,” it would seem important that we investigate whether, from the perspective of Meillassoux’s speculative materialism, Deleuze is able to escape the supposed irrationality of sufficient reason within which Heraclitus and Hegel remain locked.²⁰

Now some may object, not completely unreasonably, that to characterize Deleuze as a philosopher of absolute becoming or flux is as uncharitable as attributing that same position to Heraclitus, given his frequent highlighting of the reality of *both* the virtual and the actual, as well his emphasis upon the mutual determination of these two categories and his nuanced conceptualization of the three syntheses of time. Nonetheless, I would still contend that the perpetual becoming of the virtual as a principle of both differentiation and individuation – referred to in *Difference and Repetition* as the “third synthesis”, and in *The Logic of Sense* as “Aion”, and derived primarily from the ideas of Nietzsche and Bergson—is the central axis upon which all Deleuze’s other central metaphysical concepts can be located, and perhaps reduced. More importantly though, my analysis in this essay is far more narrow, given the enormous scope and complexity of Deleuze’s work: I intend to examine quite specifically his reading of Heraclitean flux within *Nietzsche and Philosophy*—his second book, and the first to bring the question of becoming to the fore—as well as the related arguments in *Difference and Repetition*, rather than attempting to critique his *oeuvre* as a whole.

As is generally well known, Nietzsche, even more than Hegel or Schopenhauer, placed great importance in the category of becoming. He sought, in effect, to reverse the Platonic doctrine which metaphysics had been caught within by lauding becoming whilst denigrating being. Within his earlier works, this problematic of becoming is largely psychological in its concerns:

[d]irect self-observation is not nearly sufficient for us to know ourselves: we require history, for the past continues to flow within us in a hundred waves; we ourselves are, indeed, nothing but that which at every moment we experience of this continued flowing. It may even be said that here too, when we desire to descend into the river of what seems to be our own most intimate and personal being, there applies the dictum of Heraclitus: we cannot step into the same river twice.²¹

Here, the doctrine of flux is applied exclusively to the question of human experience. Seeking to problematize the self-presence of the thinking subject (to use the Derridean terminology), Nietzsche observes that self knowledge can only come through recognition of the way in which one’s own *being* is merely an illusion constituted on the basis of a continuous flux of experience. Over time, however, Nietzsche’s approach becomes more blatantly metaphysical (although he would obviously reject such a characterization), as well as more opaque, as the problematic of becoming comes to be tied to the notion of *eternal return* or *recurrence*. “The doctrine of the ‘eternal return,’ which is to say the unconditional and infinitely repeated cycle of all things—this is Zarathustra’s doctrine, but ultimately it is nothing Heraclitus couldn’t have said too.”²² Although this concept is never systematically explicated within Nietzsche’s writings, it is clear that he views the eternal return as the basis of an understanding of the world which abandons the illusion, foisted (he claims) by the metaphysical tradition from Socrates onward, that acts “as if outside the actual world, that of becoming, there were another world of being.”²³

It is evident that Nietzsche regards Heraclitus as one of the great philosophers of antiquity, and whilst he rarely actually writes on him, I would judge that Deleuze is correct in emphasizing the congruence between Heraclitean flux and Nietzsche’s eternal return. Deleuze seeks to follow Heraclitus, via Nietzsche, in the “affirmation of becoming”—that is, to declare that “there is *only* becoming.”²⁴ It is important to consider here that Deleuze tacitly accepts (at least part of) the critique of Heraclitus explained in the previous section: for him, will to power is precisely the affirmation of “the being of becoming,” or more accurately, the imposition of the character of being upon becoming.²⁵ It is not that being does not exist, in the manner for which Heraclitus was often criticized, but that there is no being *beyond* becoming. To reiterate, the only being affirmed by the will to power is the being of becoming, which is specifically a product *of* this becoming that both precedes and exceeds it.

This being that is affirmed in becoming is specifically the eternal return itself, for as Nietzsche argues, the claim that *everything returns* “is the closest *approximation of a world of becoming to a world of being*.”²⁶ This is not merely the return of a single entity, for that would imply the endurance of a singular identity corresponding to that particular entity; rather, it is the return of difference-*in-itself*: “returning is being, but only the being of

THE LAW OF BECOMING AND THE SHACKLES OF SUFFICIENT REASON

becoming.”²⁷ The only being, in other words, that is affirmed by eternal recurrence is the being of becoming — “the becoming-identical of becoming itself” — with the result that what is returned is not, and cannot be the same as what *existed* precisely because that which is returned is the absoluteness of becoming in the form of intensive quantity (difference-in-itself).²⁸

Nietzsche’s image of the gods playing dice in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is taken up by Deleuze as the basis of his explication of eternal return: “the dice which are thrown once are the affirmation of chance, the combination which they form on falling is the affirmation of necessity. Necessity is affirmed of chance in exactly the sense that being is affirmed of becoming and unity is affirmed of multiplicity.”²⁹ Necessity is real, but it is subordinated to chance in the sense that it can only exist *as* the actualization of the chance affirmed in each roll of the dice. In the very same manner, being is subordinated to becoming because it is only actualized as an affirmation of the continual becoming of eternal return. Eternal return only returns that which cannot be denied, which can only be affirmed; accordingly, all that is left is a purified cycle of becoming, purged of all identities, all representations, everything other than difference itself: “the dicethrow affirms becoming,” Deleuze writes, “and it affirms the being of becoming.”³⁰

The problem with this reading, if we extrapolate from Meillassoux’s perspective, however, is that the affirmation of the being *of* becoming does not eliminate the contradictory nature of absolute becoming: although Deleuze observes (correctly, in my view) that we must “stop believing in being as distinct from and opposed to becoming,” he immediately undermines this observation by presenting it as commensurate with the claim that we must “believe in the being of becoming itself.”³¹ Being, for Deleuze, can only be affirmed *of* becoming (in the form of the eternal return), and thus, being must necessarily be temporally posterior to becoming, because to posit otherwise would suggest that the eternal return is a characteristic of becoming itself, which would in turn undermine the latter’s claim to absoluteness. If becoming and the eternal return were synonymous, in other words, then the pure becoming of which being is affirmed would no longer *be* pure.

Yet the eternal return *is* in fact synonymous with becoming according to Deleuze’s account, and as such, its being cannot be posterior to becoming. Consequently, Deleuze’s claim that being (specifically the univocal being of difference-in-itself) is nothing other than the affirmation of becoming in its eternal recurrence cannot logically be the case, because given that becoming is a process that only becomes through the *perpetuum mobile* of the eternal return, it is only the being of this return that can actually enable such affirmation. The very fact that Deleuze posits absolute becoming as the starting point of his ontology necessitates an acknowledgement of a primordial being as well as becoming, for how else could this becoming be absolute? Deleuze’s “vitalist hypostatization of the correlation” (37) is predicated upon this arche-being, and yet, the claim to absolute *becoming* demands that he constantly disavow it, for to do otherwise would make the becoming relative, rather than absolute.

On top of this though, as Ray Brassier observes, “the very difference through which eternal recurrence affirms the unity of becoming obviates the recurrence of this very unity,” with the result that “the affirmation of recurrence retroactively negates the indivisibility of becoming which was supposed to provide its motivation.”³² The eternal return is supposed to affirm the univocity of being: that is, the claim that being “is said, in a single and same sense, *of* all its individuating differences or intrinsic modalities,” with the implication that all being is reducible to the intensive differences of becoming.³³ Yet the very act of affirming this becoming negates such univocity, for once being has been affirmed of becoming, it is surely no longer becoming-in-itself, but rather, becoming-for-the-sake-of-being, and thus no longer spoken of in the same sense. To reiterate, Deleuze’s affirmation of the being of becoming — his acceptance of the problem with the Heraclitean doctrine of flux — still does not make the basic concept coherent, for it relies upon the contradictory entity of a pure becoming which nonetheless contains being within itself.

The reason Deleuze falls into such a trap is that he remains attached to the classically metaphysical equivalence between being and the absolute, in which the latter can only be thought through the eternal stability of

the former—his appeal to Duns Scotus’ conception of univocity as the means of thinking the existence of God gives the game away here. Meillassoux, by contrast, views hyper-chaos as a means of finally doing away with such a distinction:

[u]nlike Nietzsche, it is not a matter of abolishing the immutable realm of ideality on behalf of the sensible becoming of all things, nor even of relinquishing traditional philosophical denunciations of phenomenal time and of the illusions of the senses. Rather, it is a matter of relinquishing the belief, common to Platonism and anti-Platonism, that becoming pertains to phenomena while intelligibility pertains to the immutable. (82)

In thinking the absolute, not within the surety of the law of eternal recurrence in the manner of Deleuze, but instead, in the radical otherness of a factuality that exceeds all necessity, Meillassoux places intelligibility in the realm of a becoming that can offer no promise of immutability whatsoever.

This leads directly to the other critique that we can make, following Meillassoux’s conjectures, of Deleuze’s principle of becoming. As we have already seen in the first section of this essay, Meillassoux makes a clear distinction between two kinds of becoming: one of which is premised upon potentiality, and the other upon virtuality. The former, he suggests, cannot be truly equated with the thought of an absolute, given that its becoming is limited by a determinate set of potentialities:

[e]very postulation of a legality, whether determinist or aleatory, identifies the world with a universe of possible cases indexable in principle, that is to say, pre-existing their ultimate discovery, and thereby constituting the potentialities of that universe. Whether a supposed law is considered probabilistic or deterministic, it posits in any case a pre-given set of possible cases which no becoming is supposed to modify.³⁴

To affirm such a law (which is, in effect, a variation upon the principle of sufficient reason), he goes on to argue, “does not challenge, but on the contrary presupposes, the essential fixity of such a becoming, since chance can only operate on the presupposition of a universe of cases determined once and for all.”³⁵

At first glance, it may appear that Deleuze, for whom necessity is affirmed of chance in the roll of a die, is on the same page as Meillassoux here, who affirms necessity of, and only of, contingency. After all, it is Deleuze himself who first makes such a distinction between possibility and virtuality, arguing that “whereas the possible is the mode of identity of concepts within representation, the virtual is the modality of the differential at the heart of Ideas.”³⁶ The distinction, however, is that Deleuze’s virtuality still remains as a delimitation upon the emergence of actual entities. Put simply, in the gods’ dice game that he so frequently refers to, Deleuze states that there “are many numbers with increasing or decreasing probabilities, but only one number of chance as such,” implying that these probabilities, which are clearly limited by the faces of the dice, all pre-exist within the becoming that will, with the roll, be actualized in an unequivocal configuration. For Meillassoux, such probabilities may be logically derived from empirical observation, but they cannot be considered laws, for ontologically, things could always happen otherwise.

The entire notion of chance, virtuality, and the becoming of pre-individual singularities still retains a commitment to the principle of sufficient reason, and thus of logical, determinate, necessary laws of causality. We can thus see the way in which Meillassoux’s conception of hyper-chaos *qua* becoming radically departs from the Heraclitean model of eternal flux, as adopted in the philosophies of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Deleuze. For Meillassoux, we must still think the absolute in terms of becoming, and yet, in order to do so, we must abandon the *necessity* of any becoming. Hyper-chaos *is* a mode of temporal becoming, but it is a virtual, lawless one, and as such, there is no necessity of change contained within it—as noted previously, hyper-chaos could potentially engender what would appear to be absolute stasis. The only thing that is necessary about hyper-chaos, following the principle of factuality, is its absolute facticity: things can always be other than they are. This does not

THE LAW OF BECOMING AND THE SHACKLES OF SUFFICIENT REASON

mean that they necessarily will be other than they are at any point; merely that it is impossible to think the impossibility that they *could be*. The universe may be in complete stasis, for instance, but this could still change at any time, precisely because even in such circumstances there is an absolute time—the time of hyper-chaos—that, as Brassier would have it, “can interrupt the flux of becoming with the same arbitrary capriciousness as it can scramble the fixity of being.”³⁷

THE RECAPITULATION OF THE PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON

The natural question to ask then, having come to such a conclusion, is whether Meillassoux’s hyper-chaos is able to overcome the incoherency that undermines the Heraclitean conception of becoming. It is important to underscore first that what unites the Heraclitean philosophers under discussion in this essay is not merely an absolutization of becoming as the ultimate ground of all existence, but a tying of the principle sufficient reason directly to this ground. The doctrine of eternal flux is deeply reliant upon this principle, for the reason that it is the law of becoming itself that acts as not only the guarantee of all change, but also such change’s origin: all things become *because* all are subject to this law of becoming. We see this quite clearly in Hegel, who proposes that the principle of sufficient reason “only asserts that things must essentially be regarded as mediated,” through which identity and difference are unified.³⁸ Becoming is thus grounded in the dialectical movement. In deliberate opposition to such assertions, Deleuze contends that “the eternal return itself does not depend on a principle of identity but on one which must, in all respects, fulfil the requirements of a truly sufficient reason,” thus positing a becoming grounded entirely in difference, rather than its inevitable sublation with identity.³⁹

From Meillassoux’s viewpoint, of course, both of these positions must be essentially illusory, given “our inability to gain access to the absolute ground of what is”—one “cannot think the unthinkable,” but one “can think that it is not impossible for the impossible to be” (42). The notion of a necessary ground of any kind is a claim for sufficient reason, and this cannot be reconciled with the necessary facticity of hyper-chaos. Although it would be easy to view this hyper-chaos as merely a surrogate form of ground—that is, one could imagine it as simply yet another law of becoming, albeit with the proviso that things do not necessarily *have* to become, but merely have the absolute potentiality of doing so at any moment—it is plainly evident that this is not Meillassoux’s intention. He submits that “the principle of factuality does *not* claim that contingency is necessary; its precise claim is that contingency *alone* is necessary—and only this prevents it from being metaphysical.” (80) In short, the claim is not that contingency is given as a necessary ground (from which we could then infer that things *must* necessarily contain the possibility of becoming-other), for this would make hyper-chaos a contradictory entity, in the sense that it already contains the alterity that would allow it to become-other; rather, the principle of factuality “designates a *pure possibility*; one which may never be realized.” (62) Things can always be other than they are, but such becoming is a pure and spontaneous irruption of unreason—it may occur, but there is no ground to guarantee that it *will* occur.

In spite of this, however, it is hard not to wonder whether Meillassoux is actually able to break free of the shackles of sufficient reason to the extent that he aspires. Although hyper-chaos is supposedly opposed to all grounds, being the thought of their very impossibility, it is not just a variation on traditional themes of apophatic theology; on the contrary, it is “a *positive knowledge of everything’s capacity-to-be-other or capacity-not-to-be,*” (62) and as such, it would appear to be given casual power in its own right, as opposed to the Humean scepticism which Meillassoux frequently leans toward. Hyper-chaos may not offer the guarantee that things are contingent, but it does offer the guarantee that things *could* be contingent. Accordingly, all change that *does* occur—that is, all becoming—is inscribed by Meillassoux within the temporality of the absolute: things are not necessarily contingent, but when they do exhibit such contingency (thus becoming-other), it is precisely *because* they are the direct causes of the hyper-chaos.

Hyper-chaos does not necessitate change, but it underwrites its virtual potentiality, and this, I would argue, is enough to negate the principle of unreason. This time is the force by which natural laws stand and fall, and therefore, such changes—as *unreasonable* as they may seem from an empirical perspective—do minimally

conform to the stipulations of sufficient reason: they do not occur for *no* reason, which is the basic condition of unreason; rather, they occur as a result of the existence of hyper-chaos. The problem for Meillassoux is that he is determined to avoid positioning hyper-chaos as merely a figural representation of the finitude of the human intellect in its ability to determine causality, and instead, to present unreason as the “veridical content of this world as such.” (82) In doing so, however, he imbues this primordial, lawless time with the status of ontological being, and as a result, cannot simply rely upon the excuse that it avoids necessitating contingency in order to preserve unreason.

The point is that by the logic of Meillassoux’s argument, hyper-chaos is the *possible* cause of all change, in the specific sense that it is the guarantee that something *can* be-other-than-it-is, overriding the seemingly stable laws of empirical causality. It is not that all change is necessarily a result of hyper-chaos, in the way that Heraclitean flux is the law from which all becoming emerges, but that within all change there is the possibility of tracing it back to the absolute. Graham Harman identifies an essential dualism within this aspect of Meillassoux’s philosophy, in which the irruption of hyper-chaotic contingency “is not for everyone and everything; it is an elite sort of event that happens without reason once in a while, not constantly in every tiniest happening in the cosmos,” claiming that the problem with such a scission is that it “allows for only two kinds of connection between things: complete causal connection (law), and no connection at all (contingency).”⁴⁰ What Harman misses, however, is that in reifying this distinction, Meillassoux does not actually eliminate causality in the latter case, but merely institutes two discrete forms of causation, one of which follows the physical laws with which we are all familiar, whilst the other emerges directly from the hyper-chaos which both precedes and supersedes these laws in a particular instance.

Adrian Johnston has already pointed out the practical implications of “the omnipotent sovereign capriciousness of an absolute time of ultimate contingency,” in terms of scientific practice, a field of study that Meillassoux frequently gestures toward, in spite of the seemingly irrationalist nature (by conventional standards) of his speculations:

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?⁴¹

What needs to be highlighted in this example is that far from conforming to the stated principles of unreason (which would surely demand an utter lack of causal efficiency, and thus explicability), by absolutizing the impossibility of necessity in a *positive*, ontological form, Meillassoux undermines the coherency of his own claim to unreason, for the very conceptualization of hyper-chaos implies causal power.

Returning to his argument regarding Meillassoux’s relationship to the question of time, Roffe demonstrates the problems here quite effectively when he notes that this “account of a radically open otherwise demands the generation of a time in which this otherwise may or may not occur, and which must arise on the basis of a law not itself subject to the principle of unreason.”⁴² In order for the virtual potentiality of becoming-other to always exist, not as a possibility within beings themselves, but within the very openness of hyper-chaos, there must be a subsequent moment of time within which such virtuality *may* be actualized. This is not to imply that hyper-chaos demands a linear, sequential understanding of time—it is, as Johnston describes it, composed of “discontinuous points of instantaneity” irreducible to any laws of time—but it does suggest that the becoming of hyper-chaos cannot be truly *unreasonable* in the way that Meillassoux conceives of it, for its guarantee that contingency may always occur *must* be predicated upon a minimally structured ontology of time, for otherwise there could be no such guarantee.⁴³ Hyper-chaotic becoming can occur, therefore, because hyper-chaos is a specific form of time, and as such, this becoming is—in a second sense—*reasonable*.

THE LAW OF BECOMING AND THE SHACKLES OF SUFFICIENT REASON

The third demonstration of this continued but unwitting reliance upon the principle of sufficient reason is derived from the analysis of Christopher Watkin, who proposes that the drawback for Meillassoux's ontology is that "he acknowledges that what is thought about (trees, stars, laws) is absolutely contingent, but he exempts from contingency the thinking itself."⁴⁴ Following Meillassoux's own axioms, the very categories that he utilizes to characterize hyper-chaos, and the thought processes through which he reaches them must also be susceptible to the reasonless reordering of factuality, potentially "replaced by other, currently unimaginable, ways of thinking."⁴⁵ The blindspot in Meillassoux's theory, in other words, is that he strives to establish "a reason emancipated from the principle of reason—a *speculative form of the rational*" (77) through an appeal to a force of contingency that can at any moment undermine the norms of rationality to which he appeals. His reliance upon these contingent norms in order to posit an absolute entirely hostile to such contingencies is circular and self-refuting: "contingency along with all the laws and principles of logic might well be unthinkably meaningless after any hyperchaotic change, along with the notions of 'hyperchaos' and 'change' themselves."⁴⁶

There is a certain naïvety in the way that Meillassoux assumes, as Watkin puts it, that "our current conceptual armature ('hyperchaos' included) can be wielded in whatever situation might eventuate."⁴⁷ The categories that he utilizes (e.g. contingency, necessity, possibility, potentiality, virtuality, alterity, facticity, etc.) are predominately drawn from a fairly conventional lexicon of continental philosophy, and thus, would hardly seem adequate for representing the sheer radicality of hyper-chaos as an entity. How, one must ask, is Meillassoux able to describe the absolute using terminology that is in itself contingent? The answer, to put it simply, is that Meillassoux would seem to presume the necessary reasonableness of thought, despite disavowing all claims to sufficient reason: hyper-chaos is apprehensible as such precisely as a result of the surety of its correspondence to an intellect able to conceive of the difference between that which *is* and that which can become-*other*.

This, therefore, is my basic thesis: all philosophers of flux, operating in the tradition (allegedly) inaugurated by Heraclitus, are premised upon thinking the absolute *qua* becoming. Becoming is the necessary being upon which all causality is grounded. Meillassoux, by contrast, offers something quite different—"a chaos so chaotic that even becoming may arise and perish within it." (69) He attempts to achieve this by abolishing the notion of an eternal law of becoming, which he regards as a contradictory entity—and as I have shown in this essay, remains as such regardless of whether it is expressed by Hegel or Deleuze—and substituting for it a hyperchaotic becoming which does not guarantee contingency, but guarantees the necessity of nothing other than contingency, being founded upon the principle of unreason. Yet this attempt by Meillassoux to finally abolish the principle of sufficient reason fails, in my view, for his determination to situate hyper-chaos as a positive, ontological entity provides the basis upon which the reasonableness of its irruptions of contingency may be thought. Hyper-chaos becomes the necessary ground of such contingency, and as a result, remains within the logical framework that Meillassoux quite deliberately hopes to escape: it itself is unveiled as a contradictory entity.

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

NOTES

1. G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. London and New York: Continuum, 1994, 155.
2. This and all subsequent parenthetical references are taken from Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Trans. Ray Brassier. London and New York: Continuum, 2008.
3. I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, A369.
4. Q. Meillassoux, "Metaphysics, Speculation, Correlation." *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 22 (2011): 20.
5. J. Roffe, "Time and Ground: A Critique of Meillassoux's Speculative Realism." *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 17:1 (2012): 64.
6. Q. Meillassoux, *Après la finitude: Essai sur la nécessité de la contingence*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006, 88.
7. Q. Meillassoux, "Time Without Becoming." Presentation at Middlesex University, May 8, 2008.
8. Q. Meillassoux, "Potentiality and Virtuality," *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. Melbourne: Re.press, 2011, 230-231.
9. Meillassoux, "Potentiality and Virtuality," 231.
10. Meillassoux, "Potentiality and Virtuality," 232.
11. Quoted in P. Curd, *A Presocratics Reader*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2011: 45.
12. See Plato, *Cratylus*, 401d and Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 987a for just two examples.
13. M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Vol. I: The Will to Power as Art*. London: Routledge, 1979, 22.
14. Meillassoux, "Time Without Becoming."
15. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic (with the Zusätze)*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991, §88.
16. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, §88.
17. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, §88.
18. M. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, 87.
19. See Q. Meillassoux, "Subtraction and Contraction: Deleuze, Immanence, and Matter and Memory." *Collapse* 3 (November 2007), in which he attempts to reconstruct Deleuze's concept of immanence from a single fragment of his work, in the manner of a pre-Socratic philosopher.
20. T. May, "When is a Deleuzian becoming?" *Continental Philosophy Review* 36:2 (2003): 139.
21. F. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 223.
22. F. Nietzsche, "Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are," *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. Trans. Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, "The Birth of Tragedy", 3.
23. F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*. New York: Vintage Books, 1967, 32.
24. G. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. London and New York: Continuum, 1983, 22.
25. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 22..
26. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 617.
27. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 50.
28. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 50-51.
29. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 24.
30. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 24.
31. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 44.
32. R. Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 221.
33. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 45.
34. Meillassoux, "Potentiality and Virtuality," 231.
35. Meillassoux, "Potentiality and Virtuality," 231.
36. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 350.
37. Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 68.
38. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, §121.
39. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 45.
40. G. Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011, 142.
41. A. Johnston, "Hume's Revenge: A Dieu, Meillassoux?" in *The Speculative Turn*, 101.
42. Roffe, "Time and Ground," 65.
43. Johnston, "Hume's Revenge," 97.
44. C. Watkin, *Difficult Atheism: Post-Theological Thinking in Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy and Quentin Meillassoux*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011, 150.
45. Watkin, *Difficult Atheism*, 150.
46. Watkin, *Difficult Atheism*, 152.
47. Watkin, *Difficult Atheism*, 153.