

Research Article

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What End of Thought? On the True and the False Problem of Philosophy

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2022-0242>

received November 22, 2022; accepted March 28, 2023

Abstract: The end of metaphysics problematizes philosophy, for it implies the end of thought “itself.” Though this raises the question how to think after the end of metaphysics, the question can only be asked on the condition that the “problem of philosophy” is posed, presupposing an answer to the question what the end of thought is. This article critically compares two ways of posing that problem. It argues that one, here called active nihilism, poses the problem falsely: it implies an answer to the question what the end of thought is, even as it makes that question impossible to answer, rendering the very problem unsolvable. The true problem of philosophy, the article argues, is what is here called the entanglement of thought and experience. In order to demonstrate what active nihilism and entanglement actually come down to, the article then presents two cases. One involves a detailed analysis of Meillassoux’s refutation of correlationism, showing how the problem of philosophy is rendered unsolvable in actual fact. The other case concerns what is called catastrophic thought. An effective demonstration of the end of thought, this first answers the question what the end of thought really is.

Keywords: catastrophic thought, correlationism, facticity, finitude, active nihilism, end of metaphysics, problem of philosophy, Quentin Meillassoux, transcendental philosophy

1 Active Nihilism and Entanglement

Beginning is a problem. This may sound all too common, but it is not just an issue in the everyday psychological sense, be it the mundane trouble of getting up in the morning or the more serious pathological procrastination, typical of the neurotic. Since the Critical Turn at least, beginning has been a truly philosophical problem. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that there can be no such thing as an absolutely necessary being – a being whose necessary meaning, or essence, would include its existence.¹ The argument is made to refute Anselm’s “ontological proof” of the existence of God, and arguably it does just that. Yet this particular refutation does not exhaust the argument’s implications. Rather, it is valid for any absolutely necessary being in general; the God of Anselm may be special, but by no means the only point in case. And there is more. Abolishing any being that would “be there” by and of itself, Kant’s refutation of the Anselmian proof implicates the purely rational “knowledge” of such spontaneous beings also known as *metaphysics*. A prism for the Critical Turn at large, Kant’s refutation of the ontological proof implies as much as the very *end of metaphysics*.

¹ See Kant, *Critique*, “On the impossibility of an ontological proof of God’s existence,” A592/B620 ff.

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Ultimately, the end of metaphysics problematizes even and especially philosophy itself. After all, if there can be no absolutely necessary *being*, how could there be any absolutely necessary spontaneous *thought*? But how then does thought begin? How could it, if it has even begun? Are we thinking at all? If there is thought, if there is some thinking going on, then it must only be so because something conditions thought *from outside thought* and, moreover, *forces* it to think precisely its condition. Yet by dint of being (the) outside (of) thought, its very own condition must be impossible to construct or derive in and for thought. Consequently, the “real” condition of thought must be unthinkable – it must be the veritable *end of thought*. So if there is thought, it must be conditioned by something utterly unthinkable and absolutely contingent. A *brute fact* forcing thought for no reason whatsoever, it *cannot but* be “thought” negatively, that is, insofar as it is affirmed to be absolutely recalcitrant to, or withdrawn from, thought. Such is the *facticity* of thought. So the problem of the beginning of thought is also that of its end. It is this, the *finitude* of thought, that we shall consider *the* problem of (post-Kantian) philosophy as such.²

The problem of philosophy raises the question how to think (after) the end of metaphysics. How to answer this question depends crucially on the way the problem is *posed* in the first place.³ Though the latter is far from self-evident, as will be made clear shortly, it might seem that there is only one way to pose the problem and consistently think (after) the end of metaphysics. This would come down to the decision to think the end of metaphysics as the invalidation, if not the falsity, of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, and to affirm it not just once but twice. Indeed, in the absence of a first Being whose existence would be guaranteed by its essence, there is *no reason*, nor can there be, “why there is something rather than nothing.” Acknowledging the end of metaphysics in this sense amounts to affirming *nihilism*, but it is only thought consistently if it is reaffirmed, as *there is no reason why there is no reason*. The end of metaphysics is then paradoxically, if consistently, thought to be self-affirming. This is no longer nihilism plain and simple. It has rather become active.

We shall call this thought-movement of affirmation, reaffirmation and self-affirmation of the end of metaphysics *active nihilism*.⁴ As such, active nihilism proposes an answer to the question how to think (after) the end of metaphysics along the following lines: to think (after) the end of metaphysics consistently is to reaffirm it, and to reaffirm it is to be *forced* to think it without reason, that is, as an *event*. Put differently, if and only if it is thought as an event, the end of metaphysics acquires a positive consistency of its own. To think (after) the end of metaphysics is to make the event consist, and for thought to make the event consist is for the end of metaphysics to affirm itself. Thus, active nihilism does not simply coincide with or copy the problem of philosophy, that is, the finitude of thought. For the latter is “thought” only negatively and critically insofar as it is affirmed to be absolutely recalcitrant to, or withdrawn from thought, as was said above. Active nihilism, by contrast, poses and even manages the problem in and by its positive and creative thought of (the consistency of) the “unthinkable” event. And this is indeed a thought that comes *after* that event, in the sense that it is the thought and, more precisely, the *subject* of its consequences, deciding between those that are consistent with the event and those that are not.

For all that, the post-metaphysical thought-event merely implies the problem of philosophy and, moreover, simply presupposes that it has already been posed. Active nihilism only poses the problem

² Insofar as the problem of philosophy strips thought of its metaphysical transcendence and forces it to think its conditions outside of thought instead, it may be integral to a naturalist and realist “renewal” of Continental philosophy, argues John Ó Maoilearca. Continental philosophy problematizing itself in this way and “attempting the seemingly impossible” – to think the end of thought – would be no less than an event of *Post-Continental* philosophy, he thinks. If Ó Maoilearca has “outlined” this event in its virtual state (its “evental site”), the present article amounts to an attempt at an *actual* thought of the end of thought. See Mullarkey, *Post-Continental*, “Introduction,” especially 11.

³ The critique of how problems are posed (*la position des problèmes*), as well as the distinction of true and false problems, is essentially indebted to the work of Bergson; see his “Introduction,” throughout.

⁴ The term active nihilism is borrowed from Deleuze’s work on Nietzsche, referring to the link Deleuze forges between nihilism and affirmation; cf. *Nietzsche*, chapter 5. It is a loose borrowing, though, and the way the term is used in this article does not presuppose or require any specific prior knowledge. Many thanks go to Evrim Bayindir for his generous editorial comments, especially for guiding my attention towards the Deleuzian concept of active nihilism.

explicitly in its specific treatment of the *ontological question*. Consider pure thought – thought *a priori*, the thought of metaphysics, *Logos*. In order to constitute all there is, up to and including itself, pure thought must ultimately ask the question what being *qua* being is – literally, it must ask what “is” is. As a consequence, it cannot but be confronted with the problem of its sense. For the form that any answer it might give must have in order to make sense – “is” is this or that – presupposes the very answer. Then, *either* the answer is circular, which only begs the question, *or* the attempt to give a proper answer to the question gives way to an infinite regress, which renders it unthinkable. Any attempt to answer the ontological question thus seems doomed to fail. So pure thought is very far indeed from constituting the Being of beings, their Sufficient Reason, or absolutely necessary being – not to mention *itself*. Instead, it only succeeds in constituting the end of thought, its very own end, or so it would seem.

But does it? Pure thought cannot but affirm that the problem which the ontological question confronts it with is structurally, necessarily unsolvable. To deny this is simply to be in denial of the problem. Hence, the problem presents pure thought with an aporia, a fundamental blockade in the form of a *stranger* that cannot possibly be “reasoned with”: the end of thought. Affirming its very own end, pure thought affirms that there is no absolutely necessary being, which is to say it affirms the end of metaphysics. There is, however, a highly ambiguous remainder involved in this affirmation which leaves a “margin” for pure thought *after* the end. For the end of thought is affirmed precisely by pure thought. So the affirmation of the end of metaphysics is *reaffirmed* by pure thought as its very own end, rendering it *self-affirming*. With regard to the ontological question, this does not mean that the aporia is only apparent or mere illusion. The point is rather the other way around: affirming that the question – what is “is”? – is problematic amounts to affirming that “is” and *is*, in and as the very problem of their difference, have one and the same sense, namely the problematic one. Posing the problem this way – affirming, reaffirming, self-affirming – thus offers the key, if not to the univocity, then still to the consistency of Being.⁵ In any case, it provides the “clearing” for pure thought to go on after the end; such is *its* event.⁶

This is how active nihilism poses the problem of philosophy and answers the question how to think (after) the end of metaphysics. Yet there is something really strange about this way of posing the problem. Or rather, it might not be strange enough. Either way, it has to do with active nihilism casting *pure* thought as the protagonist. To all intents and purposes, the end of thought is essentially strange to pure thought to begin with and remains so “in the end.” Sure, pure thought is confronted with the end, yet this “confrontation” remains superficial at best, strangely passing by. The end of thought is rather made into pure thought’s own self-affirming leverage. Never is the end of thought reflected upon in the sense that it would be reflected into pure thought and actually, effectively *thought*. Now, the strange thing about the way active nihilism poses the problem of philosophy – the finitude of thought – is this: it may well *imply* the end of thought, but it does not *actually* think it. What is more, active nihilism presupposes the end of thought – hence the self-affirming end of metaphysics – even as it performatively contradicts it, because *pure thought knows no end*. Presupposed and made impossible at the same time, the end of thought is in effect “foreclosed.” Posing the problem of philosophy like this amounts to rendering the very problem *unsolvable*. This is to say that, by foreclosing the end of thought, active nihilism poses the problem of philosophy altogether *falsely*.

There is more to say about why the problem, if posed this way, is false. By failing to actually think the end of thought, the pure thought of active nihilism does *wrong* to the ontological question, to the problem of philosophy and, strangely, to “itself.” For what pure thought fails to appreciate is the sense of the ontological question, or rather that it has *a* sense at all. However strange, it makes sense to ask what “is” is. Yes, any answer to this question presupposes itself, and *this* “in-itself” provides the highly seductive force for

⁵ Univocity and consistency are the “products infinitely in the making” of Deleuze’s and Badiou’s pure thoughts after the event. For Deleuze’s idea of univocity, see e.g. Deleuze, *Différence*, 53–61; and Deleuze, *Logique*, 25th series; for Deleuze’s (and Guattari’s) idea of consistency, see e.g. Deleuze and Guattari, *Philosophy*, chapter 1; and for Badiou’s idea of consistency, see e.g. Badiou, *Being and Event*, Parts IV and V.

⁶ On the clearing (*Lichtung*), cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §28, 133.

arguing both that the ontological question constitutes *the* problem of philosophy and that the problem of philosophy affirmed constitutes *the* sense of Being. But in its precipitation to secure either univocity or consistency, pure thought forgets one thing: itself. It could not have begun to answer the ontological question if it did not *think* there was a question to be asked, and it could not so much as think to question “being qua being” if it did not have *a* sense of what “is” is already. The problem with the problem of philosophy as it is posed by the pure thought of active nihilism is that it focuses on the answer – it presupposes *itself*, authorizing the ensuing infinite cascade of self-affirmation. But before the answer, first there is the question. And though *its* problem is easy to mistake for the former, it is radically different – indeed, it is really *strange* to it: thought is immediately given – it experiences – *a* sense of *is*.

Not a problematic sense constituted in and by pure thought as *one selfsame* sense – no, just *a* sense, indefinite and indeterminate, given to (be) thought without giving any one, unique transcendental sense or direction – *without giving itself to itself* – in advance of anything else. This given is truly the end of thought, yet reflected into thought, which is thereby *forced* to think – and think that it *is* finite. To be clear, thought is necessarily finite because *a* sense of *is* cannot but be given to it first, so that thought is delivered to an experience which it cannot master in advance, much less retroactively, *in principle*. Indeed, thought is radically separated from any supposedly unique transcendental sense of *is*, and this separation of thought and “the” real is precisely what makes thought and experience indiscernible in the end. We shall call this the principle of the *entanglement* of thought and experience.

Let us recapitulate. Active nihilism forecloses the end of thought, which is why the way it poses the problem of philosophy renders it unsolvable. Thus posed, it is simply a false problem. The *true* problem of philosophy is that thought cannot but think the end of thought, as it is first and only given *a* sense of *is*, before it could possibly give itself to itself and affirm its own identity through the thought-movement of affirmation, reaffirmation and self-affirmation that we have been calling active nihilism. The true problem of philosophy is, in short, the entanglement of thought and experience. Posed in *this* way, the problem is far from unsolvable. For even if it is essentially strange to pure thought, the thought-experience entanglement is an intimate stranger. In fact, it does the work of each and any formal thought – (as) *demonstration*, because nothing definite and determinate *is given* to thought – “nothing” is given precisely *to be thought*.⁷ So the true problem of philosophy is really quite sobering: because it cannot presuppose, much less rely on, anything “pregiven,” it cannot but demonstrate whatever may be given. That is why beginning is a philosophical problem, or rather *the* problem of philosophy.

What the false problem ultimately boils down to is that the end of metaphysics only ever *implies* the end of “thought,” namely as a particular case that is allegedly included in critically de-absolutized being in general. As the next section will make clear, such an understanding treats thought as if it were (a property of) a conditioned, finite *being*. Yet if this merely implied identity lacks a proper, independent demonstration, inferring the end of thought from the end of metaphysics is nothing but a circular affair. Moreover, as thought is *without a thought* (mis)taken for a thing, this reduction is surely made “in bad faith.”⁸ Much the same can be said about the way in which active nihilism poses the problem of philosophy. It stops short of an actual or effective *thought* of the end of thought, though this alone allows for an answer to the question how to think (after) the end of metaphysics.

Admittedly, we have treated these matters in a very general, not to say abstract, manner so far. The purpose in doing so was to “find our bearings in thought.”⁹ But even if such an end justifies the dry and even transcendent means, it has a clear disadvantage. One might complain that the argument, as it

7 Cf. Lyotard, *Differend*, 16: “If nothing is therefore, then demonstrations say everything without exception’ It is from this simultaneously nihilistic and logological standpoint that we receive and study the question of reality. Reality is not bestowed by some goddess at the tip of her index finger, it has to be “demonstrated,” that is, argued and presented as a case, and, once established, it is a state of the referent for cognitive phrases.”

8 See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 70 ff.

9 Cf. Deleuze and Guattari, *Philosophy*, 37: “The plane of immanence is not a concept that is or can be thought but rather the image of thought, the image thought gives itself of what it means to think, to make use of thought, to find one’s bearings in thought.”

concerns thought – the end of metaphysics, active nihilism, entanglement – and thought alone, is so abstract that it could be about anything and consequently ends up being about nothing. This is all the more true of the argument's pivot. Active nihilism is judged to pose the problem of philosophy falsely because of its effective foreclosure of the end of thought, while entanglement would be the true problem of philosophy for providing an effective thought of the end of thought. The questions all of this cannot fail to raise are how the end of thought is effectively foreclosed and how it can *be* effectively thought.

If the argument is to have any force, these questions must not remain unanswered. What is more, if entanglement is the true problem of philosophy, then it must *and* can be demonstrated 1) how active nihilism renders the problem of philosophy unsolvable and 2) how the end of thought can effectively be thought. If the first demonstration succeeds, it will immediately demand that the second be given, too. This is precisely what the remainder of the present article will attempt, the following two parts giving these demonstrations in the aforementioned order. Beginning with active nihilism, the upcoming second part will analyse a factual, contemporary case of it. As this analysis will lay bare, however, active nihilism begs the question, for it lacks an actual, effective thought of the end of thought. The third and final part of this article will then proceed to demonstrate the very end of thought.

2 The Case-Meillassoux

Where, or rather when and with whom, could we find an exemplary case of active nihilism? In the history of modern philosophy, Nietzsche might look the part of the originator; Deleuze, for one, seems to think so. As is well known, however, Nietzsche's "thought" on nihilism was only reconstructed posthumously, in *The Will to Power*, from scattered journal entries, notes and sketches, raising the question whether it should be called authentic or rather deemed a fabrication.¹⁰ Instead, the germ of active nihilism might well have been in the eyes of its beholder, one Gilles Deleuze. What this suggests in any case is that, although its inspiration may well have been Nietzschean, active nihilism was very much a twentieth-century invention.

Before Deleuze, Heidegger was perhaps the first to engage with, and be concerned about, a nihilism that was somehow active – "the nothing itself *nihilates*" (*das Nichts nichtet*), he famously notes in his inaugural address of 1929, *What is Metaphysics?*¹¹ And later, in *The Question Concerning Technology* (1953), when Heidegger approvingly quotes Hölderlin's verse, *But where danger is, grows/The saving power also*, is he not speaking, however circumspectly, of the end of metaphysics ("where danger is") and its self-affirmation ("the saving power")?¹² Indeed, Heidegger may have been onto something that we, in retrospect, could call active nihilism, but surely we would be going too far if we took his work to be a clear-cut case of it. The "question of the nothing" pops up everywhere and nowhere in particular in the vast corpus, lacking delimitation. Besides, Heidegger does not seem to have used the term consistently, if at all.

It was Heidegger nonetheless who arguably set the stage for thematizing thought after the end of metaphysics as a thought of the event (*das Ereignis*). Then, it seems to have been the band of French philosophers now commonly associated with post-structuralism who picked up the theme and ran with it. Badiou and (again) Deleuze even took it so seriously that they made the consistency of the event the very core of philosophy, or of their philosophies at least.¹³ With them, active nihilism becomes a proper *method*: a way of posing (and solving) problems in general, and of posing the problem of philosophy in particular – which is what all problems deemed philosophical are thought to come down to. But circumscribing a generic method is not yet selecting a specific case. Moreover, it would be a bit of a stretch to take the sprawl of an entire philosophy, be it Deleuze's or Badiou's, for a clearly delimited whole.

¹⁰ See Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, throughout, especially Book One.

¹¹ Heidegger, "Metaphysics," 103, italics added.

¹² Heidegger, "Technology," 333.

¹³ Needless to recall the title of Badiou's central work, *Being and Event*. Also, Deleuze and Guattari note that it is "philosophy's sole aim to become worthy of the event" (*Philosophy*, 160).

A veritable case of active nihilism can rather be found with these philosophers' equally original and critical inheritor, Quentin Meillassoux. In his seminal essay *After Finitude*, Meillassoux stages an intervention in the history of post-Kantian philosophy which, as will be shown, boasts all the defining features of active nihilism. By affirming and reaffirming the end of metaphysics – or the “invalidation of the Principle of Sufficient Reason,” as he calls it – his intervention decides between consistent and inconsistent consequences, so as to make the event itself consist and *ipso facto* affirm itself. For those who don't know, we are speaking of Meillassoux's refutation of *correlationism*. This is both precise and specific enough to be considered a case, and a contemporary case at that. Let us turn to it forthwith.

2.1 Against correlationism

Correlationism is generally described as the “orthodoxy” of post-Kantian philosophy that anything there is to know about things “in themselves” is always already, and only, “for us.”¹⁴ As Meillassoux sees it, this makes post-Kantian philosophy a competition, not of who can describe substance in the most absolute manner, but of who can trace the “correlation” of world and thought to its most originary structure. For thought could not simply get out of the correlation, towards the “Great Outdoors,” without the very performance annulling its escape – even and especially the thought of such an escape, the thought of an absolute “in-itself,” is thought precisely *by us*. So it is that thought cannot but de-absolutize itself, unavoidably rendering the “in-itself” just “for us,” tightening the chain of correlation the harder it pulls. Yet it is the inverse of this de-absolutization of thought which, as Meillassoux makes plain, truly hits home the message of correlationism. For as far as it is concerned, any statement made about the “in-itself,” not in the relative “for-us” sense but *literally*, “*is a non-sense*.”¹⁵

From the point of view of correlationism, there is nothing wrong with disqualifying the “in-itself” as non-sense. Admittedly, if the “in-itself” were exhausted by absolutely necessary *beings* and, derivatively, absolutely necessary *becomings* – the objects of metaphysics and ideology, respectively – then correlationism would be entirely right. Meillassoux has no qualms about conceding this. In fact, he unabashedly affirms correlationism insofar as it spells the end of metaphysics once and for all, as it stands for the decision, he thinks, of putting the *Principle of Sufficient Reason* out of order, declaring it invalid. This is all well and good for Meillassoux. However, if that is the “decision” which Kant's Critique boils down to, then the Critique has to be critiqued in turn for rendering the metaphysical and the absolute strictly synonymous.

By suspending the Principle of Sufficient Reason, correlationism makes sure that nothing can be said to have a reason to necessarily be, and be what and such as it is; and if anything does appear to be necessarily so, well, it simply isn't, except relatively of course, for us. But then, Meillassoux wants to know, what about the kind of statements typically made by modern experimental science? Statements about the date of origin of the universe, the accretion of the earth, the origin of life on earth, not to mention the origin of the human species – these are all statements about a time when *we* were not there, and could not possibly have been there, to experience and express what is referred to in those statements.¹⁶ *If* such statements make sense, argues Meillassoux, then it must also make sense that the subject of thought – said human species, *we* – *comes after* the dates referred to.

Instead of these statements being contemporaneous with the subject as so many of its world-correlates, thought itself must first emerge in the *deep time* of those dates, which for that very reason cannot be

¹⁴ See Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, Chapter 1, especially 5 ff. Also, the original poster for the Speculative Realism workshop at Goldsmiths (University of London, UK) states that it “will bring together four philosophers whose work, although shaped by different concerns, questions some of the basic tenets of a ‘continental’ orthodoxy while eschewing the reactionary prejudices of common-sense”; see Brassier et al., “Speculative Realism,” 307.

¹⁵ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 17.

¹⁶ These exemplary statements of modern experimental science are all taken from Meillassoux himself; see *After Finitude*, 9.

thought of as its correlate. On the contrary, thought must be radically *contingent* upon this time as much as this time itself must be one of radical, *necessary* contingency – *Chaos*, says Meillassoux.¹⁷ Thought must be at an immense temporal remove from this “world without thought.” What is more, thinks Meillassoux, this abyss in and of time cannot just be a fact described by *some* scientific statements, such as the aforementioned ones, that could be passed off as a monstrous if contained kind of excess. The “fact” of this excess must rather be structural. More precisely, it must be the condition of the possibility of the sense of *any* scientific statement, for modern experimental science either makes sense literally – it refers to the world, or rather the universe, independent of “us,” or “in-itself,” thereby rendering all thought an *afterthought* – or it makes no sense at all. This structural condition of temporal discrepancy is baptized *diachronicity* by Meillassoux, presumably as a critical distinction from the *synchronicity* that is the fundamental effect – the illusion – of correlationism.¹⁸

The question then is what the condition of the possibility of the literal, diachronic sense of modern experimental science might be – and if such a condition could be so much as thought, given correlationism and its disqualification of any literal sense of the “in-itself” as non-sense. This is indeed Meillassoux’s question, and the answer to it, he contends, is right there to be unlocked inside correlationism itself. How? As Meillassoux has it, diachronicity makes sense if and only if the radical contingency of thought upon time is merely a not-so-special case of an absolute *necessity of contingency*. This absolute would amount to a principle of “unreason,” as he calls it – or active nihilism, as we might call it.¹⁹ Moreover, this principle is thinkable as such, even and especially for correlationism, as the former re-affirms the very decision which the latter stands for, the invalidation of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Yet this re-affirmation is also an equally decisive torsion of correlationism, inasmuch as the latter is either *forced* to think the facticity that shores up its pivotal distinction – *there is no reason* why anything should be necessarily so *in itself*, the fact only appears to be so *for us* – as an absolute, or relinquish the very force of its argument against metaphysics – the argument works insofar as that distinction works, and *it* only works if its facticity is thought to be absolute.

Forcing it to decide between consistency and inconsistency, as well as between the new absolute of the necessity of contingency and the old absolute of metaphysics, Meillassoux effectively makes correlationism undo itself either way. However, the decision is far from indifferent, for there is only one way to re-affirm the end of metaphysics, and that is to unleash unreason as the absolute necessity of contingency. No doubt, this is what Meillassoux’s decision comes down to. It re-affirms and radicalizes Kant’s, *actualizing* what was virtually already there in the latter. The necessity of contingency thus provides a counterexample to the rule of correlationism that the absolute and the metaphysical are synonymous: because of its very unreason, it is patently a *non-metaphysical* absolute. For this “reason,” Meillassoux’s decision not only re-affirms the end of metaphysics and the invalidation of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, but precisely also invalidates the de-absolutization of thought that is synonymous to correlationism. And so, with and against correlationism, Meillassoux unlocks an absolute that would seem to fit the bill, furnishing the condition of the possibility of diachronic sense. Last but not least, its very performance demonstrates that philosophy can be *speculative* – reach an absolute – without being metaphysical.

2.2 Absolute facticity

This sums up Meillassoux’s case against correlationism. Active nihilism clearly shines through. It is not nearly as clear, however, how this case might also foreclose the end of thought. In order to show this, a

¹⁷ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 64.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 112. Meillassoux’s term diachronicity arguably connotes *diachrony*, a term hailing from structuralist linguistics as well as (post-)structuralism more generally (the same could be said of synchronicity and *synchrony*); I thank reviewer #3 for pointing this out. That said, no specific prior knowledge of the genealogy of Meillassoux’s terminology is presupposed or required to understand the present discussion of his argumentation.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

survey is not enough; only a detailed analysis of Meillassoux's argument and *its* force will do. The critical question here is: how does it work? The argumentation is easy enough to outline.²⁰ What is at stake is the condition of the possibility of diachronic sense. In order to establish this, the strategy is to play out the two purported principles of correlationism – the in-itself/for-us distinction and facticity – so that the “faultline that lies right at its heart” is identified.²¹ By means of a counterexample which correlationism cannot but admit, the argument then attains its end: an absolute is reached that would successfully provide the condition of the possibility of diachronic sense.

But how does the argument work in detail? First of all, the desired counterexample is that of the possibility of a world without us, which implies a world without thought. Correlationism would seem to deny this “possibility” as non-sense. Yet it is precisely the argument that correlationism relies on to make this an effective negation which Meillassoux uses for leverage against it. Meillassoux's argument thus depends on an analysis of how, and if, the correlationist argument works. As a demonstration of this analysis, Meillassoux stages a philosophical discussion between several interlocutors about the hereafter that can be glossed as follows.²²

Two realists enter the scene. One of them holds that there is really a life after death, while the other – the “atheist” – firmly denies this. Both, however, are equally adamant in their dogmatic convictions, taking their statements to be true regardless of the possibility of experience they offer – or, in this case, do not offer. Enter the correlationist, who intervenes by making the inverse point: neither the one nor the other realist could make any claim about what happens after death – what happens *without them* – without presupposing themselves there, alive and well, to even make those utterances – and pragmatically contradict their realist sense. This is the correlation *in optima forma*: the realist “absolute” is thought by us, which means the “in-itself” is always already and only “for-us. Qua pronouncements on the “in-itself”, these (and any) realist claims are impossible to verify or falsify. Such claims are disqualified as non-sense, it is true, but there is more to it: as correlationism suspends any literal realist sense by appending the “codicil” “for-us” to it,²³ what *can* reasonably be said about them is that they are all equally and only *possible*.

Following this admission by the correlationist, another interlocutor intervenes, honing in on the former's apparent certainty. Indeed, the correlationist seems all too sure that the realists' statements can be neither true nor false because the “in-itself” lacks any sense except the one it has “for-us” – because of the correlation, says this interlocutor. But how can the correlationist be so sure, she asks, unless absolutely nothing is real except the very correlation? Far from disqualifying the absolute, *it* must be the absolute itself, concludes this interlocutor. Which means, moreover, that the subject of thought is forever there to witness absolutely *everything*, dismissing the assumption on which the correlationist tacitly relied to disqualify the realists' statements – the finitude of the subject – as itself untenable.

This is how the *subjective idealist* would re-absolutize the very kernel of de-absolutization. Against her bid for absolute correlation, the correlationist then mounts a counterattack by way of the second principle of correlationism, the *facticity* of the correlation itself. What the idealist seems to be assuming is that the correlationist *knows* that the correlation is necessarily the way it appears to us, yet this is to take correlationism too lightly. If the correlationist “knows” anything, it is that the correlation is itself a fact. Therefore, there is no reason for it to be as it is – what is more, there is no reason for it to be at all. Like any other fact, the correlation is not necessary but only possible. It is this radical, factic understanding of the correlation which in one fell swoop bars the idealist absolute and levels it with its realist counterparts as merely possible.

It is at this point that the speculative philosopher strikes. Warding off the idealist “threat” of absolute correlation, the correlationist harnesses facticity in her defence, and successfully so. But for that success, the speculative philosopher notices, the correlationist must pay the price. Facticity means that both realist

²⁰ This outline, as well as the following examination, concerns Meillassoux's argument in Chapter 3 of *After Finitude*.

²¹ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 59.

²² See *ibid.*, Chapter 3, especially 54–60. For the purpose of this examination, the order of the argument is slightly modified.

²³ On the correlationist “codicil of modernity,” see *ibid.*, 13.

and idealist statements regarding the “in-itself” are equally possible, not just in the logical (trivial) sense of being well-formed propositions, but as possible variations of the “in-itself.” Despite the “fact” that no truth value can possibly be assigned to any one of them by itself, it would make no sense for the correlationist to entertain a virtually unlimited stock of such statements as *equally* possible (contra the idealist) if she thought that the “in-itself” could not *really* vary, and radically vary *for no reason whatsoever*. And so the very force of the correlationist’s last line of defence, facticity, in turn forces her to think an absolute “capacity-to-be-other” – including the capacity-*not*-to-be. The correlationist must *know* this capacity to be absolute, argues the speculative philosopher, because she cannot effectively de-absolutize her first principle – the correlation, against the idealist absolute – without tacitly absolutizing the other – facticity. This is how “the faultline right at the heart of correlationism” is identified, demonstrating how the virtual unreason of correlationism can and will be actualized as a *speculative* principle.

Of course, the correlationist will balk at the speculative philosopher’s (ab)use of said faultline and resist it in the only way she knows: by invoking the facticity of the correlation. What the speculative philosopher calls her “knowledge” of facticity as an absolute is, again, no knowledge but ignorance – it is to hold that each and any statement on the “in-itself” is indifferently possible, she re-affirms. Yet this gesture of resistance cannot but seal its fate all the more decisively. For facticity re-affirmed is *either* thought as a multiplicity of possibilities that *are* necessarily equal – and which *can* therefore equal each other out, as the correlationist seems to take for granted: this implies the “absoluteness of possibility” and the concomitant capacity-to-be-other.²⁴ Or it is simply no effective thought.

As was already mentioned in passing, the absolute capacity-to-be-other is also a capacity-not-to-be. More precisely, the latter concerns the realist statement made by the atheist that “our existence is completely abolished by death, which utterly annihilates us.”²⁵ Sure enough, the literal sense of this statement amounts to a non-sense for correlationism. Yet as a *possibility*, which correlationism is forced to think absolutely, it cannot but admit that the world without us, such as it is invoked by the atheist, is *thinkable*. A counterexample is thus produced on the back of absolute facticity – Meillassoux speaks of the “speculative essence of facticity” as “factuality” (*factualité*)²⁶ – which refutes the de-absolutizing argument of correlationism, and then some: it would also seem to prove that the condition of the possibility of diachronic sense is successfully provided by the speculative principle of factuality.

2.3 Finitude of the subject

This is how Meillassoux’s argument works – or how it is supposed to. The reason for expressing some reservation is the following. By Meillassoux’s own light, the produced counterexample is effective, because the correlationist cannot but admit that, by her own light, a world without us is thinkable as an absolute possibility. This involves a difference between what is thinkable and what is thought, between what is effective and what is implied. To wit, what is effectively thought is any possibility whatsoever *as absolutely equal*, while the *content* of this or that particular possibility is thereby implied and only implied – it is *thinkable*. With regard to the atheist prospect, this raises the question whether a world without us, let alone a world without thought, is effectively thought at all. Hence, there is reason to doubt if Meillassoux’s argument actually delivers in the end.

However unlikely, Meillassoux might disagree that there is a difference between thought and the thinkable. He might do so on the basis of an *analogon* of Murphy’s Law: whatever can be thought will be effectively thought. Yet this would beg the very question that the correlationist confronts the realists

²⁴ Ibid., 58. As Meillassoux adds, “[this] is the price of distinguishing between the ‘in-itself’ and the ‘for-us,’ since this difference is based upon the conceivability of the absolute’s capacity-to-be-other relative to the given” (ibid., 58–9).

²⁵ Ibid., 55.

²⁶ Ibid., 79.

with: how could they so much as think the statements they make without thereby contradicting their sense? Such statements are thinkable only with their literal sense suspended, that is, as all equally possible. The difference between what is thinkable as equally possible and what is possible to think effectively is thus part and parcel of correlationism – the very correlationism which Meillassoux, by way of his mouthpiece the speculative philosopher, explicitly re-affirms. Surely then, he cannot argue that there is no reason to doubt the efficacy of his argument, not in this way at least.

In and on its own terms, however, might it not be enough for Meillassoux's argument to work that the world without us only be thinkable and not effectively thought? Indeed, is it not enough that the correlationist be forced to admit a counterexample for correlationism to be refuted? Because it is forced to think, in spite of itself, that a world without us, a world without correlation, is absolutely (and equally) possible? If so, then it should be no problem that a world without us is not effectively thought, for the sheer thinkability of it would be effective enough.

Is it, though? What is admittedly thinkable, and presumably effective, is that a world without us is absolutely possible. Yet the critical question is whether a world without *us* is also a world without *thought*. Although it must seem evident to the correlationist that this is so, the "evidence" is based upon the assumption – or prejudice, the idealist might add – of the *finitude of the subject of thought*. In the context of the idealist attack on correlationism and its subsequent speculative defeat, this assumption is anything but trivial. Meillassoux has to substantiate it, and it is only fair to say that he does – to a certain extent.

After describing correlationism, arguing that it turns the sense of modern experimental science into nonsense, and consequently judging it a scandal, Meillassoux considers two rejoinders that may be expected from the side of correlationist philosophers.²⁷ The second, "more incisive objection" is that the accusation of correlationism – it constitutes a wrong to the literal diachronicity of scientific statements by replacing it with an equally literal synchronicity of world and thought – itself constitutes a wrong, namely by conflating the *empirical* sense of a statement and the *transcendental* condition of the possibility of that sense.²⁸ As the condition must be prior to the conditioned, the transcendental condition cannot and must not be mistaken for empirical sense, on pain of paralogism. *A fortiori*, the transcendental *subject* of thought is not to be confused with an empirical *object*. Yet Meillassoux's argument does precisely that (according to the transcendentalist rebuke) if it blames correlationism for thinking that the subject must literally have been there as an object supposedly would have when, for example, the Big Bang took place. So Meillassoux's argument would amount to a failure to appreciate the separation of the empirical and the transcendental, says the transcendental idealist.

Ironically, this objection turns out to be grist to Meillassoux's mill. For what his would-be opponent fails to appreciate in turn, counters Meillassoux, is that the empirical and the transcendental are not only separated, but also connected, even and especially for the transcendental idealist. For what else distinguishes the *transcendental* idealist from her *subjective* or *absolute* counterpart than the thought that the subject always already and only *takes place* in the world, namely as a possible perspective, or a "point of view"?²⁹ Such is the *finitude* of the subject, which the transcendental idealist subscribes to and the absolute idealist refuses. Which means, or rather demands, that in the end the subject of thought be objectively *embodied*. So, in the sense of its finitude, the subject is there *literally*; or else, the subject is not finite. This strategy of Meillassoux's should be familiar by now: the transcendental idealist is forced to acknowledge that what she took for an illegitimate confusion on his part is actually the only way to think her own position consistently. As a consequence, she is forced to grant Meillassoux the point that correlationism entails literal synchronicity, which is enough to block literal diachronicity and thus constitute a scandalous wrong.

No doubt, this short excursion sheds some welcome light on the detail of Meillassoux's overall case against correlationism. Its specific purpose, however, is to give substance to what seemed to be the mere

²⁷ See *Ibid.*, 18–26.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22 ff.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

assumption of the finitude of the subject. In summary, the subject of thought is finite, because ultimately it is indissociable from a particular, possible point of view. Always already “being-in-the-world,” to use Heidegger’s expression, thought cannot but be embodied.

2.4 The end of thought foreclosed

Now cinematically cut back to the question whether a world without *us* is also a world without *thought*. If “our existence” in this world comes down to that of perishable human bodies, and if, moreover, the subject of thought only takes place as a point of view, making thought necessarily embodied, then a world without *us* must by implication be a world without thought, too. With the finitude of the subject substantiated, it would finally seem that, in order to make Meillassoux’s argument work, it is enough that the possibility of a world without *us* is thinkable. Nevertheless, a world without thought remains a mere implication, and this is all the more so because substantiating the finitude of the subject ultimately begs the question *why* – what *reason* is there for thought to *be* finite, to *be* a perspective, to *be* a subject in the first place? Meillassoux does not answer this question. In fact, he does not even ask it. Nor can he, for a “reason” that shall be examined shortly.

First, the claim that the end of thought is only implied as thinkable rather than effectively thought may be bolstered and clarified by analysing how facticity is “at work” in Meillassoux’s argumentation. Sure enough, facticity is explicitly played out at the level of the dramatized argument, it need not be repeated how. But at the same time it is also “there” like an undercurrent, pervasively if implicitly determining, or rather *deciding*, Meillassoux’s argumentation and the form of his thought at large. For “in the end” facticity stands for the invalidation, if not the falsity, of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. More succinctly, it stands for the end of metaphysics. As we have seen, there is something paradoxically self-affirming about the end of metaphysics: *there is no reason why there is no reason*. This is to think the end of metaphysics as an event, and make the event affirm itself by deciding between its consistent and inconsistent consequences. This is active nihilism *in vivo*.

Meillassoux re-affirms facticity in this radical, “evental” sense. In fact, Meillassoux situates his own decision in a series after the “Galileo-event,” the “Hume-event” and the “Kant-event,” all of which are arguably earlier decisions that (re-)affirm the end of metaphysics.³⁰ And now that post-Kantian philosophy is confronted with the problem of philosophy in the specific contemporary guise of diachronicity, a “new” inconsistency comes to light, which forces a new decision. To wit, the “Kantian catastrophe” forces Meillassoux to think facticity consistently as the actual, speculative principle that it already virtually was.³¹ If “explanation” is the right word here, this explains why, for Meillassoux, thought does not so much depend on the world as on the event.³² In this respect, a world without thought is an entirely thinkable, consistent possibility. That thought may be “subtracted” from the world is even an analytic truth about the thought of, or after, the event. Yet this also brings the critical point to a head. As much as a world without thought is thinkable, it is so only because thought is subtracted from the world as from finitude as such, leaving an unchained, pure and *infinite* thought. So anything may actually be thought but the very end of thought.

Thus, a pure thought without a world may well appear to be chained to a “glacial” world without thought, but ultimately there is *no reason* for this.³³ And precisely because it is without reason, it is only consistent to think that this concatenation is necessarily a contingency and not, *pace* correlationism, a

³⁰ See *Ibid.*, 123–5. Cf. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy*, e.g. 110: “[...] conceptual personae are events.”

³¹ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 124.

³² May it be noted that the dependency is mutual (though not symmetrical): for the event to *be* happening, that is, for it to have any consequences at all, it in turn depends on thought for its consistency.

³³ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 115: “[It] is this *glacial* world that is revealed to the moderns, a world in which there is no longer any up or down, centre or periphery, nor anything else that might make of it a world designed for humans.”

correlation in principle. For this “reason,” Meillassoux cannot pose the question why thought is finite, let alone answer it – because there is no reason for it to be finite at all. But then Meillassoux’s argument, particularly the way it is supposed to work against both the transcendental and the absolute idealist, falls under the hammer of his own strategy. *Either* the argument has force, and then Meillassoux is forced to think that thought is finite (necessarily, for a reason). *Or* Meillassoux thinks there is no such reason, and then the argument has no force.

So a deep obstacle finally comes to the surface. This is none other than the problem of philosophy, or rather how active nihilism poses it: the foreclosure of the end of thought, which makes that problem unsolvable and critically undermines Meillassoux’s refutation of correlationism to boot. Surely, this begs the question how the “brute fact” – the end of thought – *can* be effectively thought, if at all. As was said above, if entanglement furnishes the true problem of philosophy, it must – and can also – furnish a veritable demonstration of the end of thought. Such a demonstration will be attempted next.³⁴

3 Catastrophal Thought

At first, it may be unclear why there must be a thought of the end of thought, or how it can even be thought at all. Does a “brute fact” not preclude precisely that it be thought? And if not, then is its very “meaning” not erased in effect? It would seem that facticity involves an exclusive disjunction: *either* the brute fact is the end of thought, by which token it cannot be thought, *or* it is thought, by which token the “brute fact” cannot be the end of thought. Though phrased differently, this is once more the problem of philosophy: a brute fact “thought” only negatively to the extent that it is affirmed to be absolutely recalcitrant to, or withdrawn from, thought. Insofar as this recalcitrance is absolute, however, the brute fact has a strange sort of necessity precisely and even exclusively *for thought*. Hence, the facticity of thought cannot but offer a margin for its strange necessity to be thought. After all, the brute fact has “force-of-thought” if and only if it *forces thought*.³⁵

3.1 A certain nothing

So the end of thought *cannot but* be thought, but *can* it? In order to answer this question, another sort of “case” must now be presented: the case of *catastrophe*. According to Peter Sloterdijk, “the only catastrophe that convinces everybody would be the catastrophe that nobody survives.”³⁶ This is to say that catastrophe would be, if anything, a self-erasing event, an event of self-erasure. Certainly, nothing could or would be known about such an event, yet this very nothing is what “everybody” certainly does know – *a certain nothing* is known. But how? Surely, if there is any knowledge of the catastrophe to speak of, it cannot be based on facts, for the body which such a fact would be inscribed on should not survive the event of its very inscription – such is the equally paradoxical and violent “fact” of catastrophe. Or else, it would not be the case that everybody is convinced only and precisely to the extent that nobody survives. More generally, catastrophe “is” the event of annihilating the condition of the possibility of any experience, rendering empirical knowledge of catastrophe a contradiction in terms.³⁷ If there is any knowledge of catastrophe, it has to be *speculative* instead – its source not experience, but *thought*.

³⁴ What follows is a much compressed version of the demonstration of the end of thought that is a part of my doctoral research into catastrophal thought more generally; see Leegsma, *Catastrophal Thought*, especially Chapter 4.

³⁵ The concept force-of-thought (*force-de-pensée*) is borrowed from Laruelle; see e.g. Laruelle, *Principles*. An elaborate, critical engagement with Laruelle’s work will have to be undertaken elsewhere.

³⁶ Sloterdijk, *Eurotaoismus*, 122 (translation ML).

³⁷ Whether the condition of the possibility of experience is understood to be material or transcendental makes no difference in the end – which is precisely the point of catastrophe and the finitude of thought alike.

If the meaning of catastrophe depends on the paradoxical condition of its knowledge, as Sloterdijk's aphorism suggests, then a hitherto undiscovered thought "of" catastrophe must lay hidden inside its meaning. We shall call the (seemingly speculative) thought implicit in the paradoxical meaning of catastrophe *catastrophal thought*. This neologism is meant, first of all, to distinguish catastrophal thought from various *phenomena* of catastrophic thinking on one hand and from *practices* of thinking about catastrophe on the other. To begin with the former, catastrophal thought should not be mistaken for any phenomenon, like the psychological phenomenon of "catastrophic interpretation." Rather, catastrophal thought first constitutes the "dark" object called catastrophe, for which reason the former cannot be any object, much less a phenomenon, itself. On the other hand, it should also be critically distinguished from any particular practice whereby catastrophe is speculatively thought into existence. Such practices may include anything from a techno-scientific simulation of future catastrophe to a "hypergenealogy" of some catastrophe from the immemorial past.³⁸ For all their differences, what these practices have in common is their point of departure: they take catastrophe to be a matter of brute fact and, as such, the very end of thought. Hence, speculative practices of catastrophe both imply and allow a knowledge without reason – *dark knowledge* – of what is supposedly a necessary contingency. Thus, these practices assume the facticity of thought. One might qualify them as *Meillassouxian* practices for this reason. The critical point, however, is in the assumption. While necessary contingency is taken for granted, the facticity of thought presupposes a *thought* of facticity. Consequently, any speculative practice of catastrophe must be critically distinguished from the thought it presupposes and takes for granted. This presupposed thought is catastrophal thought, a thought of the end of thought which cannot but be thought and, moreover, remains to be thought. This raises the question: what is catastrophal thought?

3.2 The Unthinkable

What "everybody" knows of catastrophe is a certain nothing. The question is what sort of nothing is certain; not just highly likely, but certain *a priori*. As such, the strange certainty of catastrophe must have something to do with the strict impossibility of representing it. Inversely, it must be certain that the "nothing" in question escapes every possible representation. Now, what is certain about any possible representation is this: a representation and what is represented by it are the *same* without being *identical*. Here is an example that is equally banal and clear: a selfie. You are evidently not this mobile phone, these pixels on the screen or those bits comprising the digital file, but instantly you see that it is you. You and your selfie are separated, yet they are not – they are *separated by nothing*. This separation-of-nothing is what makes any representation-of-something possible in the first place. And because this condition of the possibility must precede each and any possible representation, it cannot possibly be represented. Or rather, the separation cannot be represented, except precisely as *nothing*.

Yet does this not beg the question why this should be a *certain* nothing in the first place? What makes the separation-of-nothing a *necessity* at all? What could guarantee that, when you look at this or that picture, you see who or what it is, even and especially if that person or animal or thing *isn't there* (perhaps long dead, extinct or blown up)? Abstracting from the example now, the question is this: why should *what* something is not always coincide with (the fact) *that* it is there? If it is indeed a question of separation, then the general question is: why is any possible *meaning* separated from *existence*?³⁹

This question brings a problem to the fore. For it would seem that the answer to the question – why is existence necessarily separated from meaning? – could in principle be derived *a priori*, like any other analytic truth, from the meaning in question. In this case, that would be the *meaning of existence*. Yet

³⁸ See Horn, *Future as Catastrophe*; and Moynihan, *Spinal Catastrophism* for thoughtful considerations on the simulation and the hypergenealogy of catastrophe, respectively.

³⁹ Note that, by dint of the supposed separation, each and any meaning is always (merely) *possible*.

how could the necessary meaning, or *essence*, of existence be so much as *thought* if existence is precisely separated from meaning? The separation-of-nothing thus raises a question the answer to which it both presupposes and makes impossible. *That* is the problem. What is more, it is the very problem of philosophy.

A structural resistance to thought: that would seem to be the only way to “think” (of) the problem. What could such a “thought” comprise? If anything, could it be some kind of a “solution”? Whatever its content, it renders the quest for meaning pointless. Yet this may well be the point. Existence is stripped of all possible meaning, which might make the more reactively minded nihilist succumb to despair, but that would be to miss the philosophical elephant in the room. Inasmuch as existence is exempt from truth as correspondence, or rather insofar as *nothing* corresponds to existence, it is *unique*. And is it not precisely this exceptional correspondence with nothing, this unique (non-)correspondence, which determines the essence of existence? Even as it is no doubt “unthinkable,” it is uniquely so. This unicity, which is equally a *necessity*, is the bare minimum of reflection, the “margin” required for the end of thought to be thought and, with that, for the problem of philosophy to be “solved.” Unique (non-)correspondence thus allows for what we shall call the “extreme identity” of a certain nothing, namely the Unthinkable (with a capital U), *to be thought*. Finally, the identity of the Unthinkable is deservedly called extreme for affirming that existence is nothing *in the end*.

3.3 Movement of the Real

Because of its unique lack of correspondence, the Unthinkable can be said to cause, indeed to *force*, thought. Hence the brute fact’s dark necessity, which is also the strange certainty of catastrophic thought. Yet, even and especially if existence is thought to be the brute fact qua extreme identity or the Unthinkable, its essence isn’t any less of a problem. On the contrary, it begs the question what the problem’s essence, or the essential problem, is. What is at stake here, again and still, is the separation-of-nothing qua condition of the possibility of any representation. To be clear, this is not just the condition for this or that particular possibility. It is the condition by which the Possible is first *made possible* at all. As this condition must precede the Possible as such, *it* cannot but be real – *the Real*.

In a weird way, the Real is both included in the Possible – it is what makes it possible in the first place – and, at the same time, excluded from it – the Real is exempt from any possible representation. This simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of the Real by the Possible constitutes a weird movement, one that moves without leaving its place, a *gesture*. This is arguably the movement that “happens” in and by representation. For any representation is a possible representation insofar as it is the same as, but not identical to, what it represents. Anything is represented as what it is, thereby becoming and remaining itself, the same, the selfsame. To add *nothing but the same* – that is the essential weird movement, the “movement of the Real.”⁴⁰ And not coincidentally, this movement is equally the essential *problem* of the Real, or the problematic essence of existence.

Like any movement, the movement of the Real implies continuous change, which in turn implies *matter* in the Aristotelian sense of the “subject” (*hupokeimenon*): an elementary multiplicity “underlying” anything that is something. For this very ‘reason’, matter ‘itself’ is not something, but a certain nothing that cannot but be thought – indeed, it is the support, or Subject, of thought.⁴¹ This allows for another analogy in line with the earlier selfie example. On the television of yore – the authentic “tube” – one would sometimes see it “snow.” That snow was the “image” when there was *no* image. Or rather, it was the (non-)image of how any normal image would appear, an “image” of the electron storm affecting the inside of the television screen. This way, the brute fact of appearance “itself” was made visible, a certain nothing separating as well as connecting the image and what is imaged, or the representation and what it represents – the separation-

⁴⁰ This expression is adapted from Derrida’s idea of the real as “original supplement”; see Derrida, *La voix*, Chapter VII.

⁴¹ See e.g. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Z3.

of-nothing. And so, while the brute fact is *thought* as unique (non-)correspondence, or the extreme identity of the Unthinkable, it is *known* as the weird and problematic movement of the Real. Like an electron storm, or white noise, or chaos, the latter is a self-erasing event, an event of self-erasure, or simply *catastrophe*.

3.4 Catastrophe of thought

Two essential details thus emerge which allow us to answer the question what catastrophic thought is. It is to *think* the brute fact – the end of thought – as extreme identity of the Unthinkable and *know* it as the weird movement of the Real. These are the two “sources” of its strange certainty and dark knowledge, respectively. This must be enough at least to qualify the speculative thought “of” catastrophe, though there may well be more to say about it. Indeed, catastrophic thought can be said to “do” the Subject of thought, insofar as its (wholly implicit) performance would secure the extreme identity of “a certain nothing” by right, fulfilling the transcendental condition of the possibility of each and any representation. Thus, catastrophic thought would reach far beyond its apparent niche of dark speculation and rather “perform” the implicit if necessary thought-supplement – the Subject – of transcendental philosophy, or the genre of Critique, at large.

In any case, it might seem as if the end of thought were thought, but actually it is not quite yet, for an end-thought that amounts to an *effective* ending of thought is still missing. This *can* be thought, nonetheless, by way of the essential problem of the Real. What needs to be laid bare is that the problem exceeds and problematizes even extreme identity and unique (non-)correspondence. To make clear how, the earlier “tube” analogy may prove useful once more. As the purported dark knowledge pertaining to catastrophic thought would have it, the movement of the Real is like an electron storm. It consists of *many* particles, each of which considered apart is *nothing*, yet which together are supposed to be *a* storm. Now, one might ask if two of those particles are a storm. The answer should be “certainly not,” for how could one thing that is not a storm added to another that is not a storm either ever constitute a storm? In this “rational” manner, one might add particles together *in infinitum* and still not get a storm. It cannot be known, not just *when* a storm is constituted, but also even *if* one *ever* will. But then what about the supposed dark *knowledge*: how could one so much as *think* one knows that the many particles *are* a storm at all? The paradox is that, for all the initial intuitive certainty, there is no way to tell the “identity” of particles and storm. The particle-storm relation – and with that the matter-movement relation in general – is thus laid bare in its truly undecidable identity, rendering the relation fundamentally *complex*.

So the weird movement of the Real presents a case of Sorites Paradox. At first glance, this weird movement may appear to be much more abstract than a heap of sand, but is the paradoxical point not precisely that even something as “concrete” as a heap of sand is, all things considered, quite abstract?⁴² But nothing hangs from the perceived difference in appearance anyway. What counts is rather the indifference of form, the structural isomorphism. The weird thing about the movement of the Real is that it adds nothing but the same, presupposing the same whilst making it impossible. In this sense, the Real plays the structural part of matter, just like grains of sand or electrons in other cases. This is why the movement of the Real can be said to embody or instantiate Sorites Paradox. It may even be the case *par excellence*, because no number of grains, however large, is in fact infinite, whereas the movement of the Real actually knows no end.

This is the crucial point, which cannot but have repercussions for catastrophic thought. The latter is supposed to be the thought of the end of thought or, more precisely, of the problem of the Real, the problem it captures and “solves” in extreme identity, the Unthinkable. Laying bare an equally unthought and unruly matter inside the Unthinkable, however, Sorites Paradox makes explicit that even and precisely this

⁴² In ancient Greek, *sorites* means “heap.” The Paradox that goes by this name is attributed to one Eubulides of Megara, who is said to have been Aristotle’s sworn enemy; see Diogenes, *Lives and Opinions*, 98.

extreme identity is undecidable. Catastrophal thought is thus confronted with the following question: how could the brute fact – the end of thought – be so much as *thought* as extreme *identity* of the Unthinkable if this purported identity presupposes *unthought*, undecidable *complexity*? Catastrophal thought then founders on inconsistency. What is more, it renders *itself* inconsistent – a thought ultimately erasing itself, it amounts to a veritable *catastrophe of thought*. And so, as catastrophal thought renders itself inconsistent and finally erases itself, the end of thought is actually and effectively thought by way of this catastrophe of thought. *QED*.

May it be noted, last but not least, that catastrophal thought not only demonstrates the end of thought *stricto sensu*. It also counts as proof for the truth of the problem of philosophy posed in terms of entanglement, the effective finitude of thought. On the other hand, it falsifies and refutes the problem as active nihilism would pose it, that is, in terms of equally extreme and unique identity – the self-affirming event of the end of metaphysics. Hence, it also confirms the argument made previously in Section 1: there is no one, unique transcendental direction.

4 Conclusion

The end of metaphysics problematizes (post-Kantian) philosophy, since it implies the end of thought “itself.” Thus, the problem of philosophy raises the question how to think after the end of metaphysics. Yet this question can only be asked on the condition that the problem is posed – what is the end of thought? – in the first place.

Active nihilism might seem to be *the* way of posing the problem of philosophy. The thought of making the “event” consist, and *eo ipso* making it affirm itself, would indeed seem to be the only consistent way to think after the end of metaphysics. As a more rigorous examination of its treatment of the ontological question reveals, however, active nihilism renders the problem of philosophy unsolvable by effectively foreclosing the end of thought. Even as it implies the end of thought, it performatively contradicts it, simply making impossible what it presupposes, namely an answer to the question what the end of thought is. That is why active nihilism, as a way of posing the problem of philosophy, must be false. The true problem is rather that thought is not pure (and infinite), but necessarily entangled with experience – it is finite.

The discussion of the case-Meillassoux not only shows that it is a case of active nihilism, but the detailed analysis of Meillassoux’s argumentation also provides an example of how the end of thought is effectively foreclosed. On one hand, the refutation of correlationism presupposes that thought is finite (embodied, a perspective), but it fails to give a reason why thought should necessarily be so, on the other. It cannot but fail, moreover, for active nihilism amounts to affirming and reaffirming that “there is no reason why there is no reason.” This is how the problem of philosophy is made impossible to solve in actual fact.

In turn, this begs the question how the end of thought *can* be effectively thought. An elaborate *reductio ad absurdum*, the case of catastrophal thought demonstrates its own inconsistency. As such, it amounts to an effective thought of the very end of thought – indeed, the ensuing catastrophe of thought actually *ends* thought. Far from foreclosing it, this first answers the question what the end of thought is, which then allows for the true problem of philosophy to be posed, as well as for the question how to think after the end of metaphysics to be answered. In the end, both are really sobering. What the entanglement of thought and experience – thought-experience – comes down to is that each and any thought must be demonstrated, raising the bar for post-metaphysical thought to be creative, again and again.

Any such thought-experience – that is, demonstration – may well be a case of (in)consistency. It must be admitted that active nihilism is on the mark in this regard. Yet what the principle of entanglement critically and crucially modifies in comparison with the latter is that a demonstration worthy of the name cannot and must not presuppose any unique transcendental direction whatsoever. That thought cannot and must not give itself to itself means that no sense of identity, least of all thought’s own, is given in advance. For if anything is at stake in thought after the end of metaphysics, is it not precisely making identity consist?

Acknowledgements: This article is a much elaborated version of a paper I presented at the *Unlearning Nihilism* conference in London on June 25–26, 2022. I wish to thank Evrim Bayindir and Carl Olsson for organizing the conference, Royal Holloway’s Centre for Continental Philosophy and The New Centre for Research & Practice for making it possible, the team for making it happen and all fellow participants for making it an altogether great event.

Funding information: This publication has been financially supported by the University of Applied Philosophy (HTF).

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interest.

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