

## AFTER HERMENEUTICS?

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*Recently Alain Badiou and Quentin Meillassoux have attacked the core of the phenomenological hermeneutic tradition: its commitment to the finitude of human understanding. If accurate, this critique threatens to render the whole tradition a topic of merely historical interest. Given the depth of the criticism, this essay aims to establish a provisional defense of hermeneutics. After briefly reviewing each critique, it is argued that Badiou and Meillassoux themselves face rather intractable difficulties. These difficulties, then, open the space for a hermeneutic response, which is accomplished largely by drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur. We close with a suggested program for hermeneutic thought.*

### 1.

Phenomenological hermeneutics is in a state of crisis. While there have always been detractors of this program, the recent criticisms by Alain Badiou and Quentin Meillassoux have cut to the heart of the project: human understanding (*Verstehen*) is finite. Badiou captures the animating sentiment of the critique when he states that the central aim of philosophy today is “to finish up with the motif of finitude and its hermeneutical escort.”<sup>1</sup> Their position, however, is not the symmetrically opposite claim that human understanding is, instead, infinite. Rather, they argue that advances in mathematics long overlooked by philosophers have irrevocably changed the relation of the finite to the infinite, so that the current account of hermeneutics as a finite endeavour necessarily perpetuates the metaphysics of presence. In light of these critiques of phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophy, the aim of this essay is to provide a provisional hermeneutic response. For unless such a task is undertaken, it seems likely that our program of thought will be of little more than historical interest.

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<sup>1</sup> Alain Badiou, *Briefings on Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology*, (tr.) Norman Madarasz (Albany: State University of New York, 2006), 30. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as ST.

The steps to such a response are straightforward. First, we shall be required to review precisely what these criticisms are in a brief, though not superficial way. A key point here is that Badiou's criticism of hermeneutics is in need of some rectification for it to hit its mark. Second, and this point is crucial for establishing the relative merit of hermeneutic thought, we argue that these alternative projects simply have not made the advances claimed. Since Meillassoux's short treatise is openly an unfinished project, we focus principally on Badiou's dialectical materialism, a position that has matured over nearly two decades. Our points here will address the unwarranted reductionism entailed in both projects. Finally, we argue that hermeneutics need not fall to the critique of finitude. Our principal resource in this response is the work of Paul Ricoeur, though some borrowing will be made from other extensions. To be clear, these responses are not meant to suggest that nothing can be learned from Badiou and Meillassoux. The case is quite the opposite. Their value to philosophy is precisely in presenting new challenges, new models and new avenues for thought. Indeed, we shall see that, in order to fully meet these challenges, hermeneutic philosophers will almost certainly have to change the way they practise, or at least their shared framework of finitude. What is finally denied, then, are the sweeping claims that have made a straw man out of the hermeneutic position. What is affirmed is a new program for philosophy.

## 2.

Badiou and Meillassoux, though joined in their distaste of finitude, each present a separate critique of phenomenological-hermeneutics. Because Badiou's argument is more complicated, and in need of some rectification, we shall, for simplicity's sake, begin with Meillassoux's *ancestral argument*.

Meillassoux's little book *After Finitude: An Essay of the Necessity of Contingency* aims at awakening contemporary philosophers. "If Hume's problem woke Kant from his dogmatic slumber," he writes, "we can only hope that the problem of ancestrality succeeds in waking us from our correlationist slumber, by enjoining us to reconcile thought and

the absolute.”<sup>2</sup> “Correlationism,” we learn, describes phenomenologists, hermeneutic philosophers, even ordinary language philosophers. The definition for a correlationist is as follows:

S is a correlationist iff S holds that thought and what is (e.g. being, reality, language, the phenomenal, etc.) are correlative.

The two dominant versions of this correlationism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been consciousness, exemplified by the phenomenological hermeneutic tradition, and language, typical of Anglo-American philosophy. The former holds that what is, or what appears, is only insofar it appears in consciousness. Heidegger adopts a similar view, since “the ‘co-appropriation’ which constitutes *Ereignis* means that neither being nor man can be posited as subsisting ‘in-themselves,’ and subsequently entering into relation—on the contrary, both terms of the appropriation are originally constituted through their reciprocal relation: ‘The appropriation appropriates man and Being to their essential togetherness.’” (AF, 8) He argues that the limits of language are the limits of what can be known or thought intelligently.

There is an immediate consequence to the correlationist commitment, which one may state alternatively as the *inability to think the absolute* or the *finitude of thought*. Because correlationists are committed to the notion that it would be self-contradictory to claim there is some absolute, in-itself, without relation to thought (even to state it, am I not thinking of it?), objectivity must be redefined as universalisable representation. (AF, 4) This reformulation states clearly one’s *inability to think the absolute* as, for example, in Descartes’ discussion of primary qualities.<sup>3</sup> The *finitude of thought*, then, consists in the positive reformulation of this inability. It is, in brief, the paradoxical status whereby one is directly introduced to the things themselves, since there

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<sup>2</sup> Meillassoux, Quentin, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, (tr.) Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum Press, 2008), 128. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as AF.

<sup>3</sup> One must note here that I am glossing over the distinction Meillassoux draws between Kant’s weak correlationism, which still maintained that the absolute (= noumenal) could be thought negatively by the principle of non-contradiction, and strong correlationism, which holds that even this is only a *law of my thought* (e.g., as Heidegger holds).

is nothing behind the appearances (=transcendence), but equally trapped by them, since we cannot think of anything beyond them (=immanence). (AF, 7) Such enabling/disabling, then, characterises the truth (*a-lētheia*) of finitude.

The critique of finitude, then, can be posed as a question. Given the existence of some item that predates human existence, such as a fossil, what is the meaning of a scientist's statements about it? Since Meillassoux defines an "ancestral" as "any reality anterior to the emergence of the human species," one could rephrase this question by asking, how is one to make sense of an ancestral statement? (AF, 10) Take, for example, a "naïve" scientific statement of the following type:

Statement A: "Event x occurred y million years before the emergence of humans."

For the correlationist, this question proves unanswerable in any way that does not precisely violate its meaning. Since the correlationist holds that everything is thought in relation to some human correlate, he is committed to redescribing the scientist's "naïve" literal statement as follows:

Statement A': "Event x occurred y million years before the emergence of humans *for us*."

Such a redescription, however, is patently absurd, since it flatly denies the meaning of the scientific claim. The inability of the correlationists to countenance the literal meaning of such scientific claims is *the ancestral problem*.

Such an argument is quite powerful, since it would seem that only those who are prepared to deny any legitimacy to scientific claims, such as Biblical literalists who believe the Earth to be only 6,000 years old, could accept that the required redescription is not a problem. The *ancestral problem*, then, is supposed to force correlationists to recognise the need to admit that thought can reach the absolute, which is precisely what correlationism forecloses. To meet the problem, then, one must show that one can think the absolute in some way. More specifically, this requires that one be able to make sense of scientific claims about historical matters, such as fossils.

### 3.

We turn now to Badiou's more complex argument against phenomenological-hermeneutics, and would like to note two items straight away. First, one aspect of his general criticism of "democratic materialism" is quite similar to Meillassoux's correlationism, so Badiou has recently decided simply to take up Meillassoux's criticism as his own.<sup>4</sup> (LW, 119) Second, Badiou has an additional argument, which he has been developing since *Theory of the Subject*, that focusses specifically on the Heideggerian legacy of the finitude of thought.<sup>5</sup> Positively, what he opposes to this position is what he calls the "Cantorian Revolution."<sup>6</sup> Negatively, he proposes what we shall here call the *ghostly presence argument*. Stated as plainly as possible, it is as follows:

Phenomenological hermeneutics is committed to thinking the meaning of being without presence. This school of thought is also committed to the position that understanding (*Verstehen*) is finite. It is this latter commitment that prevents the achievement of the former, since any such limit or horizon of understanding is itself a ghostly presence.<sup>7</sup>

The conclusion of the *ghostly presence argument*, then, turns on the ability to show that a commitment to the finitude of understanding, or of the meaning of Being (*Sein*), is itself some form of presence. How can Badiou make this claim?

The answer, we believe, comes in two parts. First, we must grasp how a limit can be understood as a commitment to original pres-

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<sup>4</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, (tr.) Alberto Toscano (New York: Continuum Press, 2009), 119. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as LW.

<sup>5</sup> See, in particular, Badiou's February 6<sup>th</sup> lecture "Neighborhoods," in *Theory of the Subject*, (tr.) Bruno Bosteels (New York: Continuum Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, (tr.) Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum Press, 2005), 273. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as BE.

<sup>7</sup> Badiou explicitly states that constraining being by a limit reinstates the power of the One, or the metaphysics of presence as follows: "We have to assume, as did Lucretius, that manifold-unfolding [=being as pure multiplicity] is not constrained by the immanence of a limit. For it is only too obvious that such a constraint proves the power of the One as grounding the multiple itself." See his *Briefings on Existence*, 35–36.

ence. Badiou's point is straightforward: Heidegger himself claims that ontotheology takes beings as an original unity. In the second volume of his *Nietzsche*, Heidegger states the following: "[T]he preeminence of beings secures Being as *koinon* (common) from the perspective of the *en* [sic] (One). The distinctive character of metaphysics has been decided. The One as unifying unity becomes normative for the subsequent determination of Being." (ST, 34)<sup>8</sup> To escape the history of metaphysics, then, it is necessary to think the meaning of Being free from such unity, whether conceived metaphysically (so that substances are primary unities), transcendently (so that the "I think" is the final unity), or idealistically (so that the Absolute is the final unity). If *verstehen*, or the meaning of *Sein*, then, has some final horizon or limit that sets the parameters of beings, then it is clear that one has here an original grounding unity. Thus, thinkers who believe that the peril of thought occurs at the limit, threshold or verge, are at best ghostly ontotheologians. While Badiou has various names for this position, we shall call such partisans *liminal thinkers*.<sup>9</sup>

The second part concerns *the* criterion for determining that one does not remain committed to finitude. *Liminal thinking* defines life only in terms of death, good in terms of evil. One could say "that the term common to phenomenology and vitalism—to Husserl and Bergson, Sartre and Deleuze—is death, as attestation of finite existence, which is simply a modality of an infinite over-existence, or of a power of the One which we only experience through its reverse." (LW, 268) The One as limit regulates life by death. For Badiou, by contrast, living is "an incorporation into the present under the faithful form of a subject." (LW, 508) At a mathematical level, Badiou notes, there is nothing interesting about

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<sup>8</sup> I have quoted from Madarasz' translation rather than David Farrell Krell's for the translation of Heidegger's *Nietzsche*, since Badiou's point is somewhat lost in the standard formulation. For a similar point elsewhere in Heidegger's corpus, see *Contributions to Philosophy: From Enowning*, (tr.) Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 145–48.

<sup>9</sup> We have simply invented a term since Badiou has often changed the names, with only very slight modifications in meaning, as he developed his own position. Thus, for example, in *Being and Event*, he speaks of "ontologies of Presence" (451), while in *Briefings on Existence*, he speaks of "Romanticism" (28), and finally, in *Logics of Worlds*, he refers to "democratic materialism" (1).

a limit.<sup>10</sup> What presents the peril of thought is *the wager*, the eventual declaration that sounds an impossible trace within a world. (BE, 451)<sup>11</sup> Yet the wager itself is easy. It is the fidelity, the commitment to see the event through, that is most difficult.<sup>12</sup> Yet philosophies of finitude cannot grasp this notion; in fact, they must deny it. Thus, the deepest truth of *liminal thinking* is nothing other than nihilism. It paralyses thought when it claims that approaching a limit is profound, rather than remaining faithful to an event, since any project for intervention is stigmatised as a utopian nightmare.<sup>13</sup> *The criterion for a post-Cantorian infinite philosophy, then, is that it recognises that it is only with a positive prescription and subsequent intervention that one has encountered what is most profound in thought.*

Here, a Heideggerian response is not difficult to fathom.<sup>14</sup> Heidegger's account of the finitude of Being is not as a unity, but as a *proc-*

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<sup>10</sup> We do not mean by this that there is nothing interesting about finite mathematics, but only that there is nothing about finite mathematics that would present one with the "peril of thought," which is to say thought's most profound point. This point holds especially set-theoretically, which is Badiou's concern, since the finite is defined in terms of the infinite. See *Being and Event*, 159.

<sup>11</sup> It is unfortunate that Badiou reserves the reasoning for this point for the third appendix of *Being and Event*. Though one finds similar statements scattered throughout his corpus, including, crucially, in the first two chapters of *Briefings on Existence* and in his essay "Philosophy and Mathematics" in *Conditions*, (tr.) Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum Press, 2008). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as C.

<sup>12</sup> In the later *Logics of Worlds*, it is especially this point which concerns the appearance of consequences that distinguishes between an event proper and a weak singularity. See p. 374.

<sup>13</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, (tr.) Peter Hallward (New York: Verso Publishing, 2001), 13. This last point, clearly, is made in the context of Badiou's polemic against what passes for "ethics," but it is of a piece with the nihilism that he sees at the heart of liminal thinking.

<sup>14</sup> The interested reader can find these points spelled out in Leonard Lawlor's essay "Verendlichkeit (Finitization): The Overcoming of Metaphysics with Life," *Philosophy Today* [vol. and or n. available?] (Winter 2004), 399–412. For a similar account addressing the later Heidegger, see John Sallis, *Echoes: After Heidegger* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), ch. 1.

*ess*. It is *Verendlichung*, or finitizing, which is more like Badiou's count-for-one than an original unity. In trying to think *Ereignis* as the structuring of this finitizing process, then, are not Badiou and Heidegger committed to the same project? Furthermore, if Heidegger does not address eventual intervention, this is because *Ereignis* is more fundamental than what Badiou addresses, namely mathematics. We find, then, that Badiou fails to grasp the depth of Heidegger's thought.

With this response, we see the fundamental way in which Badiou's criticism fails. Taken without modification, Badiou at best opposes his penchant for mathematics to Heidegger's love of poetry. To rectify Badiou's position, it is necessary to construct a lemma for the *ghostly presence argument*, which we shall call the *derivative argument*. It is as follows: In order to establish that something is derivative, one must show *both* the priority of that which establishes the derivable (a move down), *and* how the phenomena are derived from it (a move up). Yet, Heidegger's claim to the priority of the meaning of Being never accomplished the return route. Thus, he must *either* abandon his position, *or* establish the derivation, *or* undertake a long hermeneutic road with other sciences. The first option is tantamount to failure, and the second was never accomplished.<sup>15</sup> Yet, in taking the third option, it is necessary to dialogue with such disciplines as mathematics, and here it becomes clear that Heidegger fails to meet *the* criterion of infinite thought: he has not thought eventual intervention, and so remains a ghostly thinker of presence. One is required, then, to take up the Cantorian Revolution and join the task of infinite thought, or remain committed to the metaphysics of presence. In either case, phenomenological hermeneutics is no longer a viable option for philosophers.

#### 4.

Before turning to a defence of hermeneutics, we would like to point out that Badiou and Meillassoux's positions are not themselves without flaws. First, we note that Meillassoux's restriction of the absolute to what can be thought mathematically is simply a non-starter. (AF, 3) What is

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<sup>15</sup> We note that John Sallis does provide tentative grounds for Heidegger's "return route" in the very late Zähringen seminars in *Echoes*, 38–43. Still, even he argues that the route was never fully accomplished.



one to make of the status of logic? Surely, mathematics cannot even begin as a discipline without it, and yet, its results are profoundly altered by logic. To take just one example, if one accepts the existence of dialetheias, or true contradictions, it is possible to prove the completeness of Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, what is the status of the sciences? Even physics admits of an experimental procedure that breaks cleanly with mathematical deduction. And even if one could somehow avoid this obvious difference, it appears that Meillassoux would be committed to an absurd reductionism of sciences such as biology to mathematics, the likes of which not even the logical positivists held. This same point, we note, holds for Badiou's treatment of "scientific subjects," by which he intends to include all kinds of logical, mathematical and scientific operations. (LW, 74)

A likely response here is that Meillassoux does not hold that mathematics, in the strict disciplinary sense, is what grants one access to the absolute, but mathematics in a broad sense. He is quite clear, for example, that he takes mathematics to include mathematical data and measurements. (AF, 11) Badiou's position is similar. He states, for example, that by "mathematisable" he means "submitted to the literal power of inferences." (LW, 74) He then spells out just what he means by inference through the category-theoretic notion of dependence. (LW, 171)

Yet the objection remains. Measurement *plus* mathematical argument hardly covers the operations of scientific inquiry, and neither is Badiou's treatment of dependence adequate. While his notion is certainly more robust, he has yet to express just how logic, mathematics and all branches of science are related. How, precisely, is biology to be understood by dependence? Or would he claim that advances in biology and medicine are not science? Furthermore, how is logic, as a discipline in which research mostly consists in non-classical logics, to be accommodated in this scheme? If any non-classical logic were to gain broader acceptance, or if logical pluralism were to turn out to be the best hypothesis available, then Badiou would have no way of explaining these changes, since his project is premised on their rejection. While most philosophers of science, mathematics or logic would appeal to criteria such as adequacy to the data, non-adhocness, falsifiability or fruitfulness,

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<sup>16</sup> This conclusion only holds at the cost of consistency, clearly.

Badiou has only dependence and consistency. (LW, 487) Thus, it is no overstatement at all to claim that relation of all the enterprises grouped under the confused heading of “scientific truth” for Badiou, or “mathematics” for Meillassoux, constitutes a point of weakness for both thinkers.<sup>17</sup> Any position that could explain the relation of these various enterprises without reducing them to some sense of mathematics would fare better.

More problematic for both thinkers, however, is an old objection that we should like to call the *appearance problem*. It is as follows:

Even if it is possible to reduce phenomena that appear in consciousness in the first-person perspective to third-person relations, one must still undertake *to reduce them*, and this requires understanding what it is one wants to reduce.<sup>18</sup>

In short, by ignoring the first-person perspective, or rather, by treating it only as “vulgar phenomenology” or a subjacent example, Badiou and Meillassoux have simply failed to meet the burden of proof. (LW, 202) Here, the difficulty remains rather intractable, for one must bridge the now (in)famous explanatory gap between first-person consciousness and third-person relations. This amounts to demonstrating something such as: *why blue looks just this way*. Badiou’s recourse to quantitative relations among the appearance of atoms in *Logics of Worlds* simply betrays the fact that *what appears as blue* is not in the first place a quantity relative to a world’s transcendental index. Even if the relation is preserved, the appearance itself is not. Yet more intractably, one will never be in a position to know whether the relation is preserved unless one first understands what the first-person perspective is. Both these reductive problems, then, pose serious challenges to the materialisms of Badiou and

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<sup>17</sup> For a similar criticism of Badiou that details the problematic status mathematics plays in *Being and Event* with respect to forcing, see Zachary Fraser’s excellent article “The Law of the Subject: Alain Badiou, Luitzen Brouwer and the Kripkean Analyses of Forcing and the Heyting Calculus,” in *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 2 (2006), 94–133.

<sup>18</sup> This argument, of course, was one of the central points of Thomas Nagel’s “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” in *Philosophical Review*, 83 (1974), 435–50.

Meillassoux, and in lieu of any adequate reply, a space opens for a hermeneutic response.

## 5.

In turning to a phenomenological-hermeneutic response, we would like to note immediately that this school of thought is *at least* not plagued with either of these reductive difficulties. The explicit use of intentionality, though usually modified from its Husserlian description, clearly avoids the *appearance problem*. Similarly, while it is not the case that hermeneutic philosophers have undertaken to address the philosophy of science as fully as they perhaps should, they are at least not committed to reductionism. Without addressing the details, we here note only that Don Ihde's various efforts to extend hermeneutic thought into the sciences and technology demonstrate that phenomenological-hermeneutics is able to broach these topics without bald reductionism.<sup>19</sup> In these ways, then, phenomenological-hermeneutics provides firmer conceptual ground to stand on than either Badiou's or Meillassoux's respective materialisms.

To make good on these relative advantages, however, we must still show that it is possible for hermeneutics to respond to both the *ancestral problem* and the Cantorian Revolution. To do this, we shall turn to Paul Ricoeur's account of hermeneutics. We note that a capital advantage of this approach is that Ricoeur's hermeneutics is already in agreement with the *derivative argument*, since that argument is hardly anything more than a simple modification of Ricoeur's principal critique of Heidegger.<sup>20</sup>

How, then, might Ricoeur be helpful here? It was noted earlier that *the* mark of a post-Cantorian philosophy enables *thought to become*

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<sup>19</sup> Though he continues to develop his understanding of these topics, we direct the interested reader especially to Don Ihde's *Postphenomenology: Essays in the Post Modern Context* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993) and *Expanding Hermeneutics: Visualism in Science* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998) for the most fundamental formulations of his expansion of Ricoeur's hermeneutic model of the text into science.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, (tr.) Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 69. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as TA.

*positive* through (a) a wager, (b) intervention, and (c) a worldly transformation. Thus, to avoid the critique of nihilism, we shall have to establish how Ricoeur's hermeneutics enables philosophic thought to function in a similar way. Our key argument here is the following: *Ricoeur's appropriation of Jean Nabert's reflective philosophy allows him to transform the hermeneutic circle into an infinite hermeneutics*. There are two intermediary points, or lemmas, that establish this thesis and at the same time answer the criticisms of Badiou and Meillassoux respectively. The *first lemma*: the structural transformation of Heidegger's hermeneutic circle cannot be sustained without an account of wagers, intervention and worldly transformation. This first point, then, makes Ricoeur's hermeneutics infinite in the sense required by Badiou. The *second lemma*: the structural transformation of the hermeneutic circle replaces the correlation between thought and being with the correlation between the question and the questioned. Since this latter correlation enables us to avoid the *ancestral problem*, it responds to Meillassoux's critique and thus establishes that Ricoeur's hermeneutics is infinite in his sense of the term. Once we have established both of these lemmas, we will legitimately be able to claim that Ricoeur does present us with an infinite hermeneutics.

## 5.1

To begin, then, let us recall in just what way Ricoeur conceives of the grafting of hermeneutics onto phenomenology. It is Schleiermacher and Dilthey, he argues, who transform hermeneutics from its regional status as a discipline of textual (especially Biblical) scholarship to that of a general and epistemological hermeneutics. Heidegger then takes the radical step of displacing this question to the more fundamental domain of ontology by the *Dasein* analytic. (TA, 64) His move inaugurates what Ricoeur famously called the "short route," to which he opposed his own "long route," which would undertake a detour through symbols and texts with the aim of recovering an account of ontology at the end.<sup>21</sup> The long route is necessary because of the above-noted *derivative argument*. One consequence of this move is that it is no longer possible to distinguish

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Conflict of Interpretations*, (ed.) Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 11. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CI.

truth from method. Another is that the relation of interpretation to transcendental reflection must be reconceived. It is for this latter task that Ricoeur enlists the help of Jean Nabert.

In his essay “Nabert on Act and Sign,” Ricoeur argues that Nabert’s lasting contribution to the tradition of transcendental reflection is to distinguish between a conscious act and its representation in signs. Because of this distinction, the interpretation of hermeneutics is not to be understood along the Heideggerian lines of explicating (*Auslegung*) what one already pre-comprehends. Rather, one interprets signs precisely because one *does not* have access to one’s conscious acts in any other way. (CI, 215) Human “finitude,” then, cannot be understood as the horizon of pre-comprehension, but only as a *lack of self-coincidence*, which requires that one engage in the *task* of self-recovery. Understanding how this task, which is just the activity of hermeneutics, is infinite thus establishes the grounds on which we claim Ricoeur has made the turn to infinite thought.

In Ricoeur’s early career, this task was executed through the recovery of *symbolic* meaning. By a symbol, Ricoeur intends “*any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first.*” (CI, 12–13) The most detailed account of how this process of symbolic interpretation occurs comes in the final pages of *The Symbolism of Evil*,<sup>22</sup> where Ricoeur outlines its three stages. The first of these is a phenomenological stage, occasioned by the Husserlian *epochē*, which attempts to understand the relation of symbols to one another. At this stage, then, truth is a matter of simple coherence among the symbols themselves. (SE, 353) Still, one cannot remain at this stage, since one must ask the more robust question of truth: “What do *I* make of these symbolic meanings?” (SE, 354) At the second stage, one enters the domain of the hermeneutic circle, which is to be understood in an Augustinian sense as: “We must understand in order to believe, but we must believe in order to understand.” (SE, 351) We have entered this stage when we admit that, as exegetes, we approach symbols from a certain point of view, and so recognise that we believe before we understand these symbols. Never-

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<sup>22</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, (tr.) Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as SE.

theless, this circle does not become a properly philosophic circle until it is transformed by a *wager*. (SE, 355) The philosopher, unlike the exegete, cannot remain at the level of neutralised belief, but must return to the ontological domain of existence. This final stage, Ricoeur argues, has the following three parts:

[a] I wager that I shall have a better understanding of man and the bond between the being of man and the being of all beings if I follow the *indication* of symbolic thought. That wager then becomes [b] the task of *verifying* my wager and saturating it, so to speak, with intelligibility. In return, the task [c] transforms my wager: in betting *on* the significance of the symbolic world, I bet at the same time *that* my wager will be restored to me in the power of reflection, in the element of coherent discourse. (SE, 355)

The components of philosophical hermeneutics, then, correspond quite closely to Badiou's own account of wager, intervention and transformation. We have thus established the *first lemma*: that philosophical hermeneutics cannot be sustained without a wager, verification and transformation.

## 5.2

Before turning to the second lemma, we would like to take a moment to clarify two points that are likely to cause some confusion. The first concerns a critical difference between the two schemas: Ricoeur's account as presented so far remains confined to a trajectory of *self-recovery*, and does not appear to be directed, as are Badiou's truth procedures, to *worldly* transformation. Does not this difference show that something is fundamentally lacking in Ricoeur's account?

Let us respond carefully. For Ricoeur, self-recovery only ever occurs in the context of the world, so the two are not actually distinct. This point is strengthened in Ricoeur's later turn to the model of the text. Recall that a "text," for Ricoeur, "is any discourse fixed by writing." (TA, 106) This fixing, while sheltering the event of discourse from destruction, fundamentally transforms the meaning of the discourse. The reason for this is clear enough: textual meaning and the intention of the

author are irrevocably sundered by the distancing engendered by the fixing. This distancing (*Verfremdung*), however, has a positive rather than a negative significance, as the decontextualisation of the world in the event of discourse allows for the recontextualisation of the text by the act of reading. (TA, 83) For the sake of methodological continuity, we note that this account of the text extends Ricoeur's early account of wagers, verification and transformation. In his early work, one undertakes such a hermeneutic inquiry only in response to symbolic events of meaning; in his later work, Ricoeur extends the domain of response to semantic innovations such as one finds in metaphor, text, narrative, action, even recognition.<sup>23</sup>

How does this textual model help in addressing the discrepancy between self and wordly transformation? First, the activity of reading, so understood, introduces a moment of self-reflexivity, which opens the space for ideological critique. (TA, 297) Next, it enables Ricoeur to address the Anglo-American debates about action theory. The text can serve as a model for meaningful action, and so allows Ricoeur to address ethical and political transformation. Thus, to recover myself means that I must recover the Other as well—this is, of course, the major thesis of *Oneself as Another*. One cannot live with the Other save through just institutions, so that, while the project *appears* introspective, it is not. The difference, in fact, suggests that while Badiou's truth procedures clearly lack any regulative critical moment, Ricoeur's *require* such a moment. While ethics, for Badiou, is simply the account of those empty personal virtues that enable one to continue in a truth procedure, Ricoeur's, by contrast, is necessarily substantive and normative.

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<sup>23</sup> One might wonder what exactly is the difference between Ricoeur's and Badiou's account of the event, now that it has been shown that hermeneutic inquiry, for Ricoeur, takes place in response to events of meaning. Though the question deserves its own piece, the following may be taken as an indication. First, Ricoeur, more like Gilles Deleuze and less like Badiou in *Being and Event*, holds that events may be mundane affairs. Second, Ricoeur does hold that there are radical events—that is, those that totally rupture with the established sense of a situation—but he approaches this point primarily through language rather than mathematical ontology. Third, Ricoeur does hold that these events of meaning have ontological significance, but that the ontology can only be gauged provisionally (as one finds in the last chapters, for example, of *The Rule of Metaphor* and *Oneself as Another*).

Our response to this difference, then, is to stand the objection on its head. *It is Badiou who fails, even after Logics of Worlds, to direct his truth procedures to the world in a robust sense, and so remains in a solipsistic subjectivity of eventual intervention, while it is Ricoeur alone who recognises the richness of human relations and political institutions.* To meet this objection, Badiou must undertake more work to show how existing institutions and relations (and not only revolution) could constitute genuine political activity.<sup>24</sup>

The second point of confusion concerns what appears to be Ricoeur's residual finitism. In *Conditions*, Badiou argues that a primary indication of the finitism of hermeneutics is its inability to break with the correlation of truth and meaning as follows:

I propose to call "religion" everything that presupposes that there is a continuity between truths and the circulation of meaning. We can thus say: philosophy is what, against every hermeneutics, against the religious law of meaning, assembles compossible truths on the basis of the void. (C, 24)

Unfortunately, this and similar statements can be a bit misleading. To simplify matters, let us consider only *Being and Event*. There, forcing occurs only after the naming of some event that is indiscernible within the situation. The meaning is accessible as a second-order referent only to those who are faithful to the generic procedure, and the statement is senseless to those who do not recognise it. (BE, 397) Meaning and truth *are* thus closely related for Badiou's own account. What he has in mind with his criticism, however, is that hermeneutics cannot break with the *meaning of the situation*, even if it aims to interpret or explicate it. Can we show that hermeneutics does allow for a radical break?

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<sup>24</sup> In part five of the preface to *Logics of Worlds*, it is true that Badiou does elaborate an example of the *state revolutionary* in the case of Mao Tse-tung. But this example only makes our point, first, because he there explicitly links political intervention to terror and the need to avoid respecting human rights, and second, because even in this case Badiou only conceives of politics as *revolutionary*. There just is no room to affirm anything good about *existing* political institutions as part of a political practice.



While this point may hold for Heidegger, what is striking about Badiou's account of meaning in relation to generic procedures is how close it is to Ricoeur's own account of the meaning of metaphors and the world of texts. Famously, for Ricoeur, metaphor captures a primary way that *radical* semantic innovation occurs. In a live metaphor, a second-order reference emerges from the non-sense that constitutes a literal interpretation of the statement.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, metaphors not only radically break with the meanings available in the situation, they redescribe *what is (qui est)* or being itself. (RM, 292) As if this were not enough to meet the objection, Ricoeur goes on to extend this account to narrative and the narrative self.<sup>26</sup> One can thus legitimately claim that living with others in and through just political institutions is not only a task, but one that requires that one engage in a process of political truth. Even more generally, the threefold process of hermeneutics outlined above is thus best understood as nothing short of Ricoeur's account of Truth (*vérité*). Ricoeur's hermeneutics, then, lacks none of the ability to subtract truths from a situation that Badiou's account has.

### 5.3

Turning to the *second lemma* of our argument, we concede to Meillassoux the point that there is a correlationism at work in hermeneutics. *But*, it is not a correlation of thought and being. For Heidegger, the hermeneutic circle becomes a living circle rather than a vicious circle because he transposes the epistemological question onto the plane of fundamental ontology. In *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur, by contrast, suggests that hermeneutics can make its circle stimulating by affirming the status of inquiry itself. To explicate this account, Ricoeur does not turn

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, (tr.) Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (New York: Routledge Classics, 2003), 261. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as RM.

<sup>26</sup> Here again, Ricoeur is pellucid. In the preface to the first volume of *Time and Narrative*, (tr.) Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), he writes: "Although metaphor has traditionally belonged to the theory of 'tropes' (or figures of discourse) and narrative to the theory of literary 'genres,' the meaning-effects produced by each of them belong to the same basic phenomenon of semantic innovation." See p. ix.

to Heidegger's formulation of phenomenological inquiry in section 2 of *Being and Time*, as this would be to take the short road. Instead, he turns to Rudolf Bultmann's *Glauben und Verstehen* in order to specify the character of the belief that precedes understanding. Quoting Bultmann, Ricoeur writes, "All understanding, like all interpretation, is...continually oriented by the manner of posing the question and by what it aims at [by its *Woraufhin*]. Consequently, it is never without pre-suppositions; that is to say, it is always directed by a prior understanding of the thing about which it interrogates the text." (SE, 351) Bultmann's insistence on "this coincidence with the *Woraufhin*, with the thing about which the text speaks," Ricoeur notes, ensures that Dilthey's romantic aim of coincidence between exegete and genius cannot be taken up. (SE, 351) At the same time, however, it also ensures that the hermeneutic circle can only be stimulating *through inquiry*.

Ricoeur's transformation of the hermeneutic circle thus establishes an alternative correlation: *the correlation between the question and that questioned*. In order for this new correlation to achieve the status of an infinite recovery, a supposition underwrites it: *there is nothing which we cannot at least question*. In response to Meillassoux, then, we note that there is a crucial difference between a correlation that affirms a (pre)understanding of *P* and a thought that *asks a question about P*. While the former does affirm a positive unity as *given*, the latter posits such a unity only as a task—one that is to be recovered only through the threefold process described above, and which closely parallels Badiou's own account. The unity gained remains revisable, but Ricoeur does not hold that we cannot access the absolute, only that we cannot access it *totally*. Our methods of dating might change, such that the date of some prehistoric fossil is revised. Perhaps we will develop some radically circular or at least non-linear notion of time such that the significance of statements concerning the prior existence of a fossil might change. Perhaps there will be developments in geological understanding such that what we now understand as a fossil changes. Any of these possibilities, and others, might occur, and it is for this reason that the hermeneut affirms the revisability of such scientific statements, though she also affirms the superiority of current explanations over others (such as Christian fundamentalism). Since this revisability is only what Meillassoux himself holds, we hold that Ricoeur's reformulation of hermeneutics meets the *ancestral problem*. (AF, 9)

## 6.

It is hoped that the above argument shows at least that the central criticisms of hermeneutics, and specifically of its commitment to finitude, do not hold. What has been outlined is the way in which Ricoeur's hermeneutics is an *infinite hermeneutics*. His appropriation of Jean Nabert allows him to reformulate the hermeneutic circle as one that proceeds only through a subtractive process of wagering on an undecidable meaning, intervening in the world, and then verifying or forcing the result. Since this activity is undertaken not only in reading, but through living one's life with and for others in just institutions, it requires ethical breaks with established meanings and norms for action aimed at just ends. Ricoeur's hermeneutics, then, is explicitly positive, and hardly succumbs to the nihilist position that supposes that the peril of thought consists in bringing one to the verge or threshold of undecidability. It thus qualifies as infinite in Badiou's sense of the term. Turning to Meillassoux, we agree that there is a fundamental correlation at work in hermeneutics, but because it is that of the process of inquiry rather than that of being and thought or understanding, it is no more problematic than Meillassoux's own adherence to the revisability of scientific results. We can access the absolute, if not totally or with incorrigible certainty, though this corrigibility is only granted because we are always open to forms of epistemic advance, which would have to explain the specified phenomena at least as well as their predecessors. Thus, Ricoeur's hermeneutics breaks with the motif of correlationism and qualifies as infinite in Meillassoux's sense. This much, then, constitutes a response to the criticism by Badiou and Meillassoux.

We should like to draw these reflections to a close by outlining why this response remains only provisional for at least three reasons. First, Ricoeur's hermeneutics remains largely tied to the *literary* model of the text. While he does undertake to expand it in discussion with Jean-Pierre Changeaux, and Ihde expands it to science, this model has not yet reached a sufficiently broad scope to encompass the status of all sciences. In particular, no hermeneutics of mathematics or logic has yet been provided, and the work on science that has been done will likely need to be deepened. Still, we recall that what has been done retains the principal advantage of avoiding the reductionism entailed by Badiou's

and Meillassoux's projects. Second, we have here only *broached* the difficult problem of the subject.

It is likely that Badiou and Meillassoux would counter the above response by suggesting that Ricoeur's narrative subject, finally, must be the unity that defines the correlation. This response is clearly, for anyone familiar with Ricoeur's work, simply inaccurate, as the subjectivity recovered there is *nothing but a relation* that emerges out of the ruins of the Cartesian *cogito*. Nevertheless, it is granted that there are numerous details that remain to be worked out. In particular, one would want to know the relation of the narrative subject to the process of inquiry. Finally, Badiou has provided a detailed account of the four truth procedures: art, science, love and politics. While Ricoeur's account of inquiry is similar to this process, the specificity of these procedures is not present in his oeuvre. Here, however, we believe that the most valuable work remains to be accomplished, for Ricoeur's account of inquiry retains a critical moment that is totally impossible for Badiou. This is why the latter has no ability, especially in the case of politics, to specify why violence, even on a large scale, is wrong. His sometimes troubling support of Maoism follows directly from this denial of human rights and his inability to recognise the positive features of established political institutions. Ricoeur's critical moment in hermeneutic inquiry, by contrast, enables him to specify the possibility of human rights and the utility of existing political institutions. He provides the grounds, then, for a positive politics without the denial of basic human rights, and without the need to transform all genuine political action into (violent) revolution. If the tasks remain large for hermeneutics, at least our future possibilities do, as well.

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