'Quentin Meillassoux’s entry into the philosophical scene marks the beginning of a new epoch: the end of the transcendental approach and the return to realist ontology. Harman’s beautifully written and argued book provides not just an introduction to Meillassoux, but much more: one authentic philosopher writing about another – a rare true encounter. It is not only for those who want to understand Meillassoux, but also for those who want to witness a radical shift in the entire field of philosophy. It is a book that will shake the very foundations of your world!'

Slavoj Žižek, philosopher and psychoanalyst

An in-depth study of the emerging French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux

In this expanded edition of his landmark 2011 work on Meillassoux, Graham Harman covers new materials not available to the Anglophone reader at the time of the first edition. Along with Meillassoux’s startling book on Mallarmé’s poem Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard, Harman discusses several new English articles by Meillassoux, including his controversial April 2012 Berlin lecture and its critique of ‘subjectalism’. Freshly called to a professorship at the Sorbonne, Meillassoux’s star has continued to rise. This expanded edition of the only book on Meillassoux remains the best introduction to one of Europe’s most promising thinkers.

Graham Harman is Distinguished University Professor at the American University in Cairo. He is the author of numerous books, most recently Bells and Whistles: More Speculative Realism (2013) and Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political (2014).
Remark on Citations

Page references to works by Quentin Meillassoux appear in parentheses in the text itself, in the form of an abbreviation followed by a page number. For example, (AF 92) means page 92 of After Finitude. A key to the abbreviations of Meillassoux’s works appears below, and full bibliographical information on these writings can be found in the list of Works Cited at the end of this book. References to works by all other authors appear as endnotes following each chapter.

Citations from Ray Brassier’s translation of After Finitude appear courtesy of Continuum Publishing. Translated excerpts from the unpublished French manuscript of L’Inexistence divine (The Divine Inexistence) and the whole of the ‘Interview with Quentin Meillassoux’ appear courtesy of Meillassoux himself; both are published in the present work alone.

AF = After Finitude
BL = Berlin Lecture (‘Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition’)
BM = ‘Badiou and Mallarmé’
CL = ‘The Contingency of the Laws of Nature’
DI = The Divine Inexistence
DU = ‘Decision and Undecidability of the Event in Being and Event I and II’
HE = ‘History and Event in Alain Badiou’
IW = ‘The Immanence of the World Beyond’
MS = ‘Metaphysics, Speculation, Correlation’
NS = The Number and the Siren
PV = ‘Potentiality and Virtuality’
QM = ‘Interview with Quentin Meillassoux’
SC = ‘Subtraction and Contraction’
SD = ‘Spectral Dilemma’
SR = ‘Speculative Realism’
With this book, Edinburgh University Press launches a new series in Speculative Realism. The Speculative Realism movement began with a now famous April 2007 workshop at Goldsmiths College, University of London (see pp. 77–80 below). In the brief ensuing period it has taken on a life of its own, especially among younger participants in the blogosphere. Books in this series may be either admiring or critical, but all will explore the ramifications of speculative realism for philosophy and the numerous disciplines in which this young movement has already had an impact: anthropology, archaeology, architecture, English literature, feminism, the fine arts, Medieval studies, musicology, rhetoric and composition, science studies, and others.

Speculative realism is best understood as a loose umbrella term for a series of vastly different philosophical enterprises. What all have in common is their rejection of what Quentin Meillassoux first termed ‘correlationism’. Whereas realists assert the existence of a world independent of human thought and idealists deny such an autonomous world, correlationism adopts an apparently sophisticated intermediate position, in which human and world come only as a pair and cannot be addressed outside their mutual correlation. Accordingly, the dispute between realism and idealism is dismissed as a ‘pseudo-problem’. Inspired ultimately by Immanuel Kant, correlationists are devoted to the human-world correlate as the sole topic of philosophy, and this has become the unspoken central dogma of all continental and much analytic philosophy. Speculative realist thinkers oppose this credo (though not always for the same reasons) and defend a realist stance toward the world. But instead of endorsing a commonsensical, middle-aged realism of boring hands and billiard balls existing outside the mind, speculative realist philosophies are perplexed
by the strangeness of the real: a strangeness undetectable by the instruments of common sense.

Given that Meillassoux coined the central polemical term of speculative realism (‘correlationism’), and given that his writings in English have been among the most popular works in this idiom so far, it is fitting that the first book in the series should be a study of his philosophy. Meillassoux was born in Paris in 1967, making him still a rather young philosopher. His debut book *After Finitude* (2006) had immediate and far-reaching impact, and his unpublished major work *L’Inexistence divine* (*The Divine Inexistence*) has been eagerly awaited for several years. I am pleased to report that the present book includes a 65-page appendix featuring translated excerpts from this unpublished but somewhat legendary work, which was written in 1997 and extensively revised in 2003.

Perhaps it is also fitting that I should be the author of this series-triggering book on Meillassoux’s philosophy. He and I have worked in proximity for five years as original members of the speculative realist movement; moreover, we also have two of the most contrasting philosophies in the group. For Meillassoux, the familiar correlationist point that we cannot think a tree-in-itself without turning it into a tree-for-us is a powerful argument that must be overcome with delicate logical finesse; for me, it is a terrible argument from the start. For Meillassoux, the principle of sufficient reason must be abolished; for me, it is the basis of all ontology. For Meillassoux, only a commitment to immanence will save philosophy from superstition and irrationalism; for me, philosophies of immanence are a catastrophe. For Meillassoux, the human being remains a unique site of dignity and philosophical questioning, and marks a quantum leap from the pre-human realm; for me, humans differ only by degree from raindrops, dolphins, citrus fruit, and iron ore. My hope is that such contrasts have generated productive tensions in the book now before you. By reflecting on these tensions, the reader will be led into the midst of some of the most important internal debates of speculative realism. But there are other such debates, and as Series Editor I welcome proposals for books on all aspects of this new approach to philosophy.

Graham Harman
Cairo
February 2011
Preface to the Second Edition

Since the publication of the first edition of this book, interest in Meillassoux’s philosophy has continued to grow, as has the amount of his work available in English. In the autumn of 2011 he published his second book, a sparkling study of the canonical French poet Stéphane Mallarmé, which is covered in Chapter 3 below. Meillassoux also made a significant career move in 2012, leaving his alma mater the École normale supérieure after many years of service for a new position as Maître de conférences at the Université Paris 1–Panthéon Sorbonne. This suggests that long-delayed recognition in his home country is finally beginning to arrive. There was even significant recognition in the art world, as in 2013 Meillassoux and his original Speculative Realist colleagues (Brassier, Grant, Harman) were ranked collectively by ArtReview as the eighty-first most powerful influence in the art world, the highest-rated philosophers on the list. In the meantime, Meillassoux’s debut book After Finitude was either already translated or being translated into roughly a dozen languages. For this second edition I have made only minor stylistic changes to the text of the first edition. But I have also added a good deal of new material. An expanded Chapter 2 contains sections on various lectures and articles by Meillassoux not available at the time of the first edition. This is followed by a new Chapter 3, devoted exclusively to The Number and the Siren. The later chapters of the book have been renumbered accordingly.

Ankara
August 2014
This is the first book-length treatment of the philosophy of Quentin Meillassoux (pronounced ‘may-yuh-sue’), an emerging French thinker of the greatest interest. Meillassoux was born in Paris in 1967, the son of the anthropologist Claude Meillassoux (1925–2005), a household name among Africanists. The younger Meillassoux studied at the famed École Normale Supérieure on the rue d’Ulm, and taught at that institution for more than a decade until accepting a position at the Sorbonne in 2012. His debut book, Après la finitude (After Finitude), was officially published in early 2006, though copies were sighted in Paris bookstores late the preceding year. Little time was needed for Meillassoux’s book to catch fire in Anglophone continental philosophy circles. In the words of Peter Hallward, a noted authority on recent French thought:

Not since [Jacques] Derrida’s ‘Structure, Sign and Play’ (1966) has a new French philosopher made such an immediate impact in sections of the Anglophone world . . . It’s easy to see why Meillassoux’s After Finitude has so quickly acquired something close to cult status among readers who share his lack of reverence for ‘the way things are.3

Prominent among Meillassoux’s teachers was the philosopher Alain Badiou, whose preface to After Finitude displays breathtaking confidence in the book: ‘It would be no exaggeration to say that Quentin Meillassoux has opened up a new path in the history of philosophy . . . a path that circumvents Kant’s canonical distinction between “dogmatism”, “scepticism” and “critique”’.4 Hinting at Meillassoux’s larger unpublished work, Badiou adds that After Finitude is merely ‘a fragment from a particularly important . . . philosophical enterprise’.5 Slavoj Žižek tells us that
‘the philosopher who addressed [the status of materialism today] in the most appropriate way is Quentin Meillassoux in his *After Finitude*. It is true that Badiou and Žižek share a number of points in common with Meillassoux’s position, and thus their neutrality might be questioned. But when Meillassoux was invited to discuss his book at a salon hosted by Bruno Latour, he impressed even those of a different philosophical stripe: ‘Meillassoux was great, three hours non-stop, I had to stop him! . . . He is a force of nature and yet very quiet and amiable . . . Everyone was greatly pleased and totally unconvinced!’

Such ringing endorsements from some of the most celebrated thinkers of our time speak well of Meillassoux’s first book. Yet his greatest impact has undoubtedly been among the young. If one book has been treated as the central monument of the newest trends in Anglophone continental thought, by allies and critics alike, it is surely this recent import from Paris. Within a year of its French publication, *After Finitude* had catalyzed the formation of the Speculative Realism movement in philosophy, and given birth to an extensive corpus of blog posts devoted to the book. Despite his clarity as a writer and friendliness as a colleague, Meillassoux quickly became something of a mysterious intellectual figure, largely due to rumors concerning the massive unpublished philosophical system to which Badiou alluded: *L’Inexistence divine*, or *The Divine Inexistence*. But there is no mystery at all surrounding his key polemical term, which has already entered the philosophical lexicon in what feels like permanent fashion. I speak of ‘correlationism’, Meillassoux’s name for the dominant ontological background of the continental philosophy of the past century. Authors working in the continental tradition have generally claimed to stand beyond the traditional dispute between realism (‘reality exists outside our mind’) and idealism (‘reality exists only in the mind’). The correlationist alternative, so dominant that it is often left unstated by its adherents, is to assume that we can think neither of human without world nor of world without human, but only of a primordial correlation or rapport between the two. Despite its inability to think anything outside the correlate of human and world, correlationism denies being an idealist position. After all, one can always claim that extra-human reality is not being rejected in idealist fashion since humans are always already immersed in a world, or something in a similar vein.
The roots of correlationism are easiest to locate in the Critical Philosophy of Immanuel Kant (though Meillassoux now speaks of David Hume as the first correlationist), released to the public in the distant 1780s and 1790s, but still forming the horizon for most philosophy in 2010. Kant’s position has two simple but major implications. The first is the basic finitude of human knowledge, which Meillassoux’s title After Finitude openly abandons. According to Kant, we are unable to have knowledge of things-in-themselves, but are limited to reflecting on the transcendental conditions of our access to the world: space, time, and the twelve categories of the understanding. By contrast, Meillassoux tries to show that absolute knowledge is possible despite the claims of Kant and his correlationist heirs, Husserl and Heidegger prominent among them.

But there is a second implication of Kant’s position that Meillassoux fully accepts. Like most post-Kantian thinkers, Meillassoux greatly appreciates Kant’s critique of ‘dogmatic’ metaphysics, which attempts to make proclamations about the world as it is without a prior critique of our ability to know the world. The typical form of the correlationist argument in our time, which goes significantly further than Kant himself, says roughly this: ‘If I try to think something beyond thought, this is a contradiction, for I have thereby turned it into a thought.’ Meillassoux is alone among the original Speculative Realists in finding this argument to be so powerful as to be initially unassailable. In his view the correlational circle of human and world is not a trivial error or word game, but rather the starting point for all rigorous philosophy. We cannot make a pre-Kantian leap into some dogmatically described exterior of thought; instead, the correlate of thought and world must be radicalized from within. In other words, the next step in philosophy must be an ‘inside job’, and our human relation with the world always retains philosophical priority over the relation between inanimate objects, despite Meillassoux’s attempted proof that there must be things independent of thought. The knowing human subject is something special in the world, and it makes no sense to speak only of a ‘difference of degree’ between human and non-human experience, in the manner of figures such as G. W. Leibniz, Alfred North Whitehead, and Gilles Deleuze. None the less, Meillassoux does not follow the Hegelian path of turning the human–world correlate into something absolute in its own right. Instead, he tries to drive a wedge midway between Kant’s
position and Hegel’s. Claiming that a position called ‘strong correlationism’ is possible, and describing how it differs from absolute idealism, Meillassoux then tries to radicalize strong correlationism into his own novel position: speculative materialism.

To summarize in reverse order, Kant holds as follows:

a. The human–world relation stands at the center of philosophy, since we cannot think something without thinking it.

b. All knowledge is finite, unable to grasp reality in its own right.

Meillassoux rejects (b) while affirming (a). But readers of my own books know that my reaction to Kant is the exact opposite, rejecting (a) while affirming (b), since in my philosophy the human–world relation does not stand at the center. Even inanimate objects fail to grasp each other as they are in themselves; finitude is not just a local specter haunting the human subject, but a structural feature of relations in general including non-human ones. Yet the present book is meant largely as an exposition of Meillassoux’s philosophy, and most of the critical counterplay between his position and my own is concentrated in Chapter 4. Otherwise I will adopt the voice of an advocate for this remarkable new thinker, who has already galvanized an entire generation of admiring supporters and detractors.

It should now be clear who Quentin Meillassoux is, and why many readers see him as one of the most original philosophers working today. But a word is also in order about this book’s subtitle: *Philosophy in the Making*. No one can predict what additional books by Meillassoux might have appeared fifty or even ten years from now. This makes it impossible to write about him in the same way that one writes of the deceased classic thinkers of yesteryear, or even of established living thinkers of advanced age. Instead of a completed philosophy, Meillassoux’s is literally a philosophy in the making, a concept I borrow from the writings of Latour. In *Science and Action* Latour makes a distinction between ‘ready-made science’ and ‘science in the making’. The former consists of established scientific facts, praised for their rationality in comparison with the night of ignorance that came before. Such established facts become ‘black boxes’ taken for granted and never opened, thereby concealing an intricate history and internal organization. As Latour puts it, ‘the impossible task of opening the black box is made feasible (if not easy) by moving in time and space until
one finds the controversial topic on which scientists and engineers are busy at work. In the present case, the timing of this book ensures that the Meillassoux black box is already open, since it has never yet been closed: there is currently no such thing as the completed philosophical œuvre of the forty-six-year-old Quentin Meillassoux. At the time of this writing (June 2014) we stand somewhere between the published After Finitude and the unpublished The Divine Inexistence, with other works undoubtedly still to come. Part of the excitement of the current study is that I am aware of no other in-depth account of a young philosopher in the midst of emergence. There is even the possibility, both intriguing and alarming, that the present book might have some effect on the ultimate shape of Meillassoux’s work. It is no longer possible to encourage Nietzsche in his loneliest hour or give feedback on the weaker arguments of St Thomas Aquinas; nor can they respond to their present-day critics from beyond the grave. By contrast, Meillassoux will be able to read and contest this book just like anyone else.

Notes

2. Quentin Meillassoux, Après la finitude. Translated into English by Ray Brassier as After Finitude.
3. Peter Hallward, unpublished manuscript. Quoted with Hallward’s permission.
5. Ibid.
8. Latour himself had borrowed the phrase from Alfred North Whitehead’s title, Religion in the Making, though in the present book I mean it in a thoroughly Latourian sense.
10. Ibid., p. 4.