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Forget Meillassoux! A critique of speculative materialism

¡Olvidar a Meillassoux! Una crítica del materialismo especulativo

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94

Abstract

Quentin Meillassoux's philosophical project aims at challenging some of the most fundamental assumptions of contemporary philosophy. His polemic against "correlationism", which he understands as the main paradigm of philosophy from Kant onwards, is grounded in a vindication of a materialism of absolute contingency that he deems "speculative". The latter furnishes its "divinological" speculations about the possibility of a "God-to-Come". In this essay, I will argue that Meillassoux fails to deliver all the ambitious promises of his project. The hypostatization of contingency relinquishes mediation in its search for an Absolute. As a result, Meillassoux becomes unable to ground the claims of contemporary science whilst he threatens to dissolve politics in the dubious sphere of religious thinking.

Keywords: Materialism, Correlationism, Mediation, Divinology, Contingency.

Resumen

El proyecto filosófico de Quentin Meillassoux aspira a poner en cuestión algunos de los presupuestos centrales del pensamiento contemporáneo. Su polémica contra el "correlacionismo", que establece como el paradigma central de la filosofía desde Kant, se sostiene sobre la reivindicación de un materialismo de la contingencia absoluta que llama "especulativo". Este último fundamenta sus reflexiones "divinológicas" sobre la posibilidad de un "Dios-por-venir". En este artículo argumentaré que Meillassoux fracasa a la hora de llevar a cabo las ambiciosas promesas de su proyecto. En su búsqueda de un absoluto, la hipostatización de la contingencia acaba por borrar la mediación. Como resultado, Meillassoux se demuestra incapaz de proveer un fundamento

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para los descubrimientos de la ciencia contemporánea a la vez que amenaza con sepultar la política en el dudoso ámbito del pensamiento religioso.

Palabras clave: Materialismo, Correlacionismo, Mediación, Divinología, Contingencia.

The Enemy of Correlationism

95

Quentin Meillassoux is an ambitious philosopher who aims to debunk what he calls “correlationism”, the main paradigm of philosophy from Kant onwards. “Correlationism” is grounded in the following philosopheme: for something to be it has to be given, and to be given it has to be given *to someone*. This seems to create an unsurmountable horizon because any argument against has to rely on what it aims to refute — any thought about a reality deprived of thought *is still a thought*. Our knowledge, the Kantian correlationist believes², is finite, and thus cannot grasp anything that is not already given to a subjective instance: it cannot, in short, grasp the Absolute — in the strong sense of something existing *by and for itself, independently of us*, and thus the ultimate object of a realist philosophy.

In his pathbreaking work *After Finitude*³, Meillassoux begins his assault on the correlationist fortress by making his first dent on its walls: correlationism, he contends, cannot think ancestrality. “Ancestrality” is the name Meillassoux uses for describing events prior to the emergence of life on Earth; events, therefore, that took place — as contemporary science can attest— *in the absence of any subjective instance to grasp them*. In the face of Ancestrality, he argues, all forms of correlationism, from Kant’s critical philosophy to wild forms of ontological solipsism, are equally flawed. None of them can properly ground those scientific claims, because the clause they are forced to add to them — that ancestral events took place in a reality prior to consciousness *for us*— deprives them of their deepest meaning (that they existed *by and for themselves*).

Meillassoux believes that Philosophy’s inability to think the Absolute has opened a door for fideism and all kinds of irrational religious beliefs. He knows, however, that after Kant there is no room for a relapse into traditional, dogmatic metaphysics: liberation from the “correlationist prison” has to be achieved *from within*.

² On the mistakes of Meillassoux *Cartesian* reading of Kant see Bruno, A.G. “Empirical Realism and the Great Outdoors: a Critique of Meillassoux” in *Continental Realism and Its Discontents*, Marie-Eve Morin (ed.), Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2017, pp. 21-37.

³ Meillassoux, Q., *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, London, Continuum, 2008.



Thinking the Absolute, therefore, demands a kind of knowledge capable of grasping Absolute necessity without positing, in a metaphysical fashion, an Absolutely necessary being. This is what he calls the “Speculative”.

Speculative thinking turns correlationism *inside out*. It departs from the facticity of the correlation — the impossibility to grasp a Necessary Being— and turns it into an Absolute: the absolute impossibility of the necessary being itself, which implies *the Absolute necessity of contingency*. If our knowledge cannot grasp a necessary being, *it is simply because there is no such thing*. This is “the Principle of Unreason”, which states that nothing exists for a necessary reason.

The concept of “Hyper-Chaos” is the natural outcome of the thesis that contingency, and contingency alone, is necessary. Everything, from physical laws to British monarchy, exists without a reason, and could disappear or change at any point in time. The only thing that the Hyper-Chaos cannot create is a contradictory being, because a contradictory being would include his non-being within itself and it would therefore be necessary. In short: the Hyper-Chaos is only bound by the law of non-contradiction, because the latter is derived from the “Principle of Unreason”.

Meillassoux goes on to explore the consequences of the latter in relation to “Hume’s problem” (of induction). According to Meillassoux’s ontologisation of Hume, reason cannot grasp the necessity of natural laws *simply because natural laws are contingent*. At this point Meillassoux faces an obvious rejoinder: physical laws do not seem to change, let alone to change constantly for no discernible reason. Nevertheless, Meillassoux believes that this statement can be refuted because it is grounded in a view of the Universe as a Totality. If a dice with an infinite number of possibilities is constantly thrown in our universe, and the result is always the same, Meillassoux’s position would be seriously troubled. But that notion of Infinity can be undermined through Cantor’s set theory, which proved that any given set includes within itself a bigger set — its power set, the set of all its subsets— *even if the former is infinite*. This discovery makes possible “*the de-totalization of being qua being*”⁴: it asserts the *unthinkability* of a “total amount of possibilities” and therefore weakens the “dice-hypothesis”. Meillassoux contends that the very existence of this option makes possible to dissociate *necessity* (a metaphysical standpoint) from *stability* (an empirical fact), and

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

thus to break the assumption that the contingency of laws would *necessarily* imply their ceaseless change.

Meillassoux concludes his book by stating that his speculative philosophy makes possible the recovery of traditional distinctions between primary qualities (existing by themselves and graspable through mathematics) and secondary ones (existing for us, and graspable through empirical science and direct experience), and, therefore, to ground the existence of matter as simultaneously independent of thought (ontological thesis) *and* knowable (epistemological thesis).

This is the core of Meillassoux's theoretical philosophy. In the next section I shall present his use of the latter in relation to the problem of mourning.

God-to-Come

In a paper entitled *Deuil à venir, Dieu à venir*⁵, published in the same year as *After Finitude*'s French edition, Meillassoux explores a speculative field of knowledge that he baptizes as "Divinology", capable of solving what might be called "the problem of mourning".

This problem of mourning is raised by the existence of specters. A specter, Meillassoux argues, is a dead soul who cannot achieve her mourning because her death was so unfair or terrible that we simply cannot reconcile with it. Moreover, there is a special kind of specter: "essential specters" — i.e. the victims of the Holocaust— whose death is so horrible, that deprived of all possible meaning, simply thinking about a successful mourning sounds outrageous. The mourning of those specters — what he would call the "essential mourning" — seems *impossible*.

In the face of this, Meillassoux explores two equally unsatisfactory possibilities: either God exists, as believers think — and therefore he can awaken the dead, and make justice to them— or he does not, as atheists do. The "believer" may seem more prepared to mourn, but the "atheist"'s rejoinder is quite strong: if God exists, it is a God who let Auschwitz happen, and thus he would be incapable of solving the problem: even if he awakes the dead, an eternity with such a cruel Being would *not* make justice to the "essential specters".

⁵ Meillassoux, Q., "Dueil à venir, Dieu à venir?", *Critique*, 2006, vol. 704, no. 705, pp. 105-115.



At this point, Meillassoux waves the magic wand of Hyper-Chaos: God cannot exist — because that would imply the existence of a necessary being— but he may exist in the future! This is not utterly impossible or nonsensical because it does not violate the minimal standard of intelligibility of Meillassoux's theoretical edifice— the Principle of Unreason—. In short, a God free from any guilt could arise, awaken the dead and establish a world of communist freedom and justice⁶. It has to be remarked that, for Meillassoux, the problem of mourning is inextricably linked to that of worldly justice: it is political *by nature*. Whether this immanent God, suddenly realized in history, would be an individual, or just a joyful community of the living and the (resurrected) dead is a matter of speculation for “Divinology”, the discipline that Meillassoux inaugurates.

Why (a) God, why?

Chirac memorably said about Eastern European countries who supported the Iraq War that they «missed a good opportunity to keep quiet». One could be tempted to say the same of Meillassoux's insights into divinology. But that would miss the point. Because his “divinological” speculation not only testifies to his inability to find emancipatory possibilities in a (godforsaken) actuality: it also sheds light on the theological resonance of his overall project, where the Hyper-Chaos resembles some kind of “Leibnizian” God who has been bereft of his rational nature, and is thus capable of *anything altogether at any point* (it might also resemble Ockham's God too, who, much like Meillassoux's Hyper-Chaos, was only bound by the law of non-contradiction). “Divinology” is therefore not a frivolous addendum to Meillassoux's theoretical edifice, but something that lies at its heart — in fact, Meillassoux's main work is not meant to be *After Finitude*, but rather a work-in-progress called *The Divine Inexistence*, where “divinological” speculations are a central concern. In that sense, comparisons between Meillassoux's *After Finitude* and Lenin's *Materialism and Empiricriticism*⁷ should extend beyond their common attempt to debunk Idealism to the religious scent of both

⁶ Meillassoux, Q, "L'immanence d'outre-monde", *Ethica*, 2009, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 39-71.

⁷ Brown, Nathan. "The Speculative and the Specific: on Hallward and Meillassoux" in *The Speculative Turn. Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Briant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, re.press, Melbourne, re-press, 2011, pp. 142-163; Brassier, R., *Nihil Desencadenado*, Madrid, Materia Oscura, 2017; Žizek, Slavoj, "Is It Still Possible to be a Hegelian Today?" in *The Speculative Turn. Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Briant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, Melbourne, re.press, 2011 pp. 202-223.

outcomes — what, in Lenin's case, can be found in the troublesome proximity between his “reflection theory of knowledge” and Neo-Tomism⁸.

Following this line, Sebastian Truskolaski⁹ has fashioned a tentative critical-materialist rejoinder to Meillassoux — inspired by Adorno's critiques of other materialist philosophies, such as Lenin's— which would contend that:

1- Meillassoux's “Hyper-Chaos” effaces all social and political mediations in favor of a mystifying philosophy of pure possibilities that “can provide no account of what drives processes of transformation”¹⁰.

2- Meillassoux “materialism” is undermined by its fetishization of mathematics: a “materialism” that claims that the ultimate knowledge we can have about matter would be a series of pure numbers, *is not very much a materialism*. Instead of resisting the capitalist process of abstraction, Meillassoux would reinforce it, effacing the aesthetic, sensuous and historical sides of the object.

A third objection might also be formulated here, inspired by Adorno's criticism of Bergson: if the latter falsely hypostatized the *temps duré* as a pure realm free of reification¹¹, we could say that Meillassoux similarly hypostatizes Time as a realm a “pure” possibilities and therefore avoids facing the intricacies of *historical time*¹².

Moreover, Meillassoux's alleged “materialism” suffers from a further deficiency, poignantly pointed out by Mackenzie Wark: its erasure of the mediating role of *social labour*: Meillassoux's fixation with the “Archi-fossil” does not lead him to consider that the only reason why we have knowledge of “ancestral” events is because high-tech devices — products of social labour— mediate between our admittedly limited cognitive powers and those remote realities.

From a broader critical perspective, it is worth mentioning that the gap between the logical (the speculative) and the empirical at work in Meillassoux's philosophy echoes the “ontological difference” in highly problematic ways: when the logical-

⁸ Eco, U., *On the Shoulders of Giants*, Belknap Press, USA, Belknap Press, 2019 p. 81.

⁹ Truskolaski, S., “Materialism” in *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School- Critical Theory*, ed. Beverly Best, Werner Bonefeld and Chris O'Kane, , London, SAGE, 2018, pp. 661-677.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 674.

¹¹ Adorno, T.W., *Negative Dialectics*, London, Routledge, 1973, p. 333.

¹² On this issue see Brassier, R. “Jameson on Making History Appear” in *This is the Time. This is the Record of the Time*, eds. A. Harutyunyan & N. Muller, AUB Press, Beirut, 2017, pp. 32-39.



ontological (absolute contingency) gets too close to the ontic-empirical, it risks sheer absurdity — solving the problem of the emergence of the mind out of matter appealing to the theological notion of *creatio ex nihilo*¹³—; when they remain completely separate, they are vulnerable to the question: so what? What does it offer a “materialism” whose main discovery is the fable of a pure contingency deprived of any practical insight?

Considering this, many authors have pointed out that Meillassoux’s efforts are not only grounded in illegitimate assumptions and category mistakes but are also inherently self-defeating¹⁴. Instead of properly grounding scientific claims, banishing religion, and offering hope, he problematizes science through a quasi-mystical “Absolute Contingency” which has religious undertones and actually vanishes any worldly hope by gambling everything on a poorly transmogrified version of the *Apokatastasis* whose probabilities are close to zero *even in the terms of his own system*.

Meillassoux poses two genuine problems (that of the relationship between necessity and contingency, and that of mourning of “essential specters” — which he rightly sees as a political problem) but then fails to resolve them in a satisfactory way — hypostatizing contingency as an Absolute incarnated in a lawless, arbitrary Time, and positing the extravagant, even frivolous possibility of a coming-God (insidiously vanishing any worldly way of dealing with the problem of mourning). No matter what his merits are, it seems clear that Meillassoux has produced a realist philosophy that lacks any interest for scientific practice and a “divinologico-political” speculation that lacks any interest for political practice.

Moreover, when confronted with politics, Meillassoux’s philosophy can be seen as an extreme example of a more general tendency: that of retreating from a hopeless actuality to a realm of unscathed, wishful possibilities. If the God of his adored Descartes saved him from the nightmare of the malign genius, Meillassoux’s coming-God saves him from (thinking) late capitalism. His logic of *either* Palingenesis *or*

¹³ Meillassoux, Q., "Potentiality and Virtuality" in *The Speculative Turn. Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Briant, Nick Srnicek, Graham Harman, Melbourne, re-press, 2011, pp. 224-236.

¹⁴ Johnston, A., "Hume’s Revenge: A Dieu, Meillassoux?" in *The Speculative Turn. Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Briant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, Melbourne, re-press, 2011, pp. 92-113; Hallward, P., "Anything is Possible: a Reading of Quentin Meillassoux’s After Finitude" in *The Speculative Turn. Continental Materialism and Realism.*, ed. Levi Briant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, Melbourne, re-press, 2011, pp. 130-141; Toscano, A., "Against Speculation, or a Critique of the Critique of Critique: a Remark on Meillassoux’s After Finitude (after Colletti)" in *The Speculative Turn. Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Briant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, re-press, Melbourne, re-press, 2011, pp. 84-91.

hopelessness resembles antinomianism at its worst. It amounts to an absolute incapability to think emancipatory possibilities *within* actuality.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that Meillassoux's theoretical philosophy does not withstand critical scrutiny. His effacement of mediation in the search for an Absolute leads to a dubious hypostatization of Time as pure contingency which it is not worth the name "materialism".

Following the young Marx, who sought to derive Heaven from the miseries of the Earth, we could deduce Meillassoux's relapse into religion from the impasses of contemporary emancipatory politics. We have argued, however, that divinology constitutes a dead-end which can only reinforce the hopelessness it rallies against.

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