

Issues and Approaches in Contemporary Theological Thought about Evil

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On Quentin Meillassoux and the Problem of Evil

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Abstract: The problem of evil and the injustice it brings out has a long history in western philosophy and it has been one of the core arguments against the existence of God as an all-powerful and all-good Being. In a number of texts Meillassoux agrees with this line of argument, but he also argues that atheism fails to take into account the injustice of evil. His central thesis is that while the existence of evil discounts the existence of the ‘revealed’ God, he proposes a messianic vision where we can hope for the arrival of a God who will have the power to rectify the injustices that have been committed. To justify the possible arrival of such a being Meillassoux describes the world as a contingent place such that things happen without a necessary reason. This explains why, in the past, novel and inexplicable situations (‘advents’) have arisen and, possibly, others might arise. One such possibility is the arrival of a God who will redeem all the injustices suffered within the world.

Keywords: Meillassoux; the problem of evil; mourning; rebirth; immortality; messianism

In her book *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Modern Philosophy* (2002), Susan Neiman provides a reading of modern philosophy that displaces the dominant epistemological narrative with one that centralises the existence of evil as the central preoccupation of modern philosophers. Whether one agrees with her thesis or not, the problem of evil has been an ongoing philosophical and theological issue to this day. This preoccupation is evident in the philosophical writings of contemporary philosopher Quentin Meillassoux whose engagement with it redresses what he considers to be the inadequate responses to the problem of evil. Broadly speaking, in ‘Spectral Dilemma’ (2008), ‘The Divine Inexistence’ (2011), and ‘The Immanence of the World Beyond’ (2010) he (a) re-states the problem of evil; (b) expresses his dissatisfaction with the religious and atheistic ways of dealing with it; and (c) articulates his own concept of the ‘divine inexistence’ or ‘divinology’ as a new way of resolving it.

My aim in this paper is to reconstruct Meillassoux’s ideas from the three aforementioned texts so as to present them holistically. While there is a certain amount of overlap between these texts, there are also a number of elaborations and inflections that warrant a presentation of his ideas in a more systematic and complete format. This presentation will also be supplemented by an examination of the issues raised by some of his commentators together with a number of questions that I raise concerning the implications of his philosophical vision. As my focus is primarily on the problem of evil and Meillassoux’s resolution of it, the sections dealing with his ontological vision will be considered only in relation to this theme.

1 The Problem of Evil

Within (Western) philosophical theology, the problem of evil in the world has been used to challenge the existence of God as a transcendent being with the attributes of omnipotence and benevolence (among others). The existence of evil, atheists contend, shows either that God is unable to prevent it and is therefore not omnipotent, or that he does not want to stop it and is therefore not benevolent.

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The evils in question are framed as natural and moral evils. Natural evils (earthquakes, tsunamis, diseases, etc.) are the result of the way the world is in its structural and material configuration. Although God is omnipotent, this is the only world that he could have created so that the choice is either this world with all its natural evils, or no world at all. The existence of natural evil is therefore justified as an unfortunate but relatively ‘minor’ problem that is certainly preferable over non-existence. On this account, natural evils are not unavoidable and neither are they an indictment of God. Moral, or as Meillassoux calls them, ‘criminal’ evils, are those evils that humans intentionally inflict upon each other (massacres, murders, rapes, etc.). These evils can only be attributed to humans, and their occurrence raises the question of why God does not intervene to prevent them and by so doing protect the victims, but instead allows them to occur. To explain the existence of moral evil, theists resort to the concept of freedom to argue that there are moral evils in the world because God has given humans the gift of freedom, and that it is freedom which enables humans to choose between right and wrong. Crucially, it is further claimed that without freedom of choice there would be no morality at all, though Mackie¹ has argued that it is logically possible for humans to have been created only capable of performing good actions.

Meillassoux’s position is opposed to the views of theists such as Plantinga² who claim that there is a morally sufficient reason for God allowing evil to occur on the grounds that freedom is a great good that enables humans to perform morally good or bad actions. Plantinga’s celebrated argument from freedom is frequently invoked by theists to show that there is no logical contradiction between the existence of an all-powerful and all-benevolent God and the existence of evil. However, while there seems to be widespread agreement that Plantinga’s argument has been decisive, for some, Meillassoux among them, the indignation one feels when confronted with the unjust dead can never be justified by an appeal to freedom.³ He points out that a standard argument used to defend moral evil is that these evils must be situated within a larger context, within the bigger picture of things. For instance, if the defence of freedom requires waging war, then the evil of war can be understood. Meillassoux rebuts this claim with two arguments: (a) to say that the ‘crimes of history’ are justified because humans have been given the freedom to commit them is similar to a politician who has been given the power to prevent a massacre, but then allows it to take place in the name of freedom. This is an abuse of freedom because it attempts to absolve God from his failure to use his power; (b) furthermore, this kind of reasoning creates the possibility of a worse scenario with others beginning to imitate God. One could, for example, imagine politicians encouraging massacres on the grounds that it demonstrates the gift of freedom. With this kind of reasoning, the existence of freedom becomes an excuse that enables the suffering of others.⁴ It should be pointed out that Plantinga’s argument from freedom only applies to moral evils, so that the question of justifying natural evils remains untouched.

For Meillassoux, it is necessary to explain both ‘natural and criminal [moral]’ evils attributing the responsibility for both unequivocally to the ‘revealed God’⁵: ‘[f]or in all religion the worst violence (murderous cataclysms, grievous mortal illnesses inflicted upon children, lives absurdly cut down by ‘fate’) are ordinarily reserved for God’.⁶ Given the responsibility of God for these evils, it would be ‘blasphemous’ for anyone to believe in him as these evils are completely undeserved by their victims. This is why such evils constitute, for Meillassoux, an unacceptable injustice, an affront to human dignity. The demand to overcome these injustices is central to his resolution of the problem of evil, and while it is clear that injustice can take many forms (hunger, poverty, abuse, etc.), Meillassoux prioritises unjust death as the supreme evil: ‘...the most extreme [injustice] is still death: absurd death, early death, death inflicted by those unconcerned with equality’.⁷ This point has proved contentious, for not everyone agrees that unjust death is the worst of evils and it is certainly true that (a) there are many other instances of injustice in the world and that (b) there are

1 Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence.”

2 Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*.

3 Meillassoux, “The Immanence of the World Beyond”, 455-6.

4 Ibid.

5 Meillassoux, “Divine Inexistence”, 209.

6 Ibid., 213-214.

7 Ibid., 191. Meillassoux is graphic in his account of ‘terrible deaths’ as ‘premature deaths, odious deaths, the death of a child, the death of parents knowing their children are destined to the same end – and yet others’ (SD 262, IWB, 451).

some instances when death is preferable to life. Both of these claims are legitimate, but in response to (a) I would claim that injustices can be situated along a ‘continuum’ of evil, with unjust deaths as the end point and highest form of injustice; (b) preferring death over a life of pain still falls within the framework of evils that befall humans—to want to die because of excruciating pain caused by an illness does not somehow mitigate the evil in question.

The occurrence of unjust deaths raises the important question of how to mourn the victims, because while the typical process of mourning brings a sense of closure to a person’s life, the injustice of these deaths prevents mourning from taking place; as a result, the spectres of the dead haunt the living. Meillassoux distinguishes between ‘spectres’ and ‘essential spectres’: while the former are those spectres we cannot mourn for some reason or other (for example, we feel that we did not love our partner enough, or that we neglected our duty towards our parents, etc.), the latter haunt us because we find the whole pointlessness of their death both unbearable and unacceptable. Their death—whether ‘natural or criminal’—could have never been predicted either by the victims or those who survive them: it is a ‘death that bears no meaning, no completion, no fulfilment, just an atrocious interruption of life...’.⁸ The insistent cry of these spectres is not a desire for vengeance upon those who are still alive, but a call to not be forgotten, a call for the injustice of their fate to be rectified. The history of the twentieth century (and not only) is one long catalogue of ‘odious’ and ‘horrendous’ deaths, and Meillassoux asks how we can ‘live a non-morbid relation with the departed?’,⁹ and how we can mourn them so that their memory would not subject the living to ‘hopeless dread’ but re-connect with them.¹⁰ In effect, what is required is a new way of establishing a relationship with the dead that would ‘actively insert[s] their memory in the fabric of our existence’.¹¹ We need to learn how to live with the dead again in such a way that they receive the justice they deserve.

2 The Spectral Response

Meillassoux’s writings provide a novel solution to the problem of evil. His central thesis is that the only way to rectify unjust deaths is by giving the dead a chance to re-live their unjustly terminated lives. The resolution of this injustice has the force of a moral imperative: ‘we owe the dead nothing less’.¹² The religious and atheist responses to the problem of evil pivot around the existence or non-existence of God and their respective positions are easily formulated: if God exists, then justice is possible, but its fulfilment can only take place in another world; on the other hand, if God does not exist, then there is no possibility of justice.

Meillassoux clarifies that in the case of the religious response to the problem of evil (a) the interest of the religious person with salvation is not motivated by an interest in his own personal salvation, but rather, ‘on behalf of the dead’. While he can readily accept his own death, the ‘terrible deaths’ of others are unacceptable;¹³ (b) the living also suffer in their knowledge of unjust deaths; their anguish is unbearable and they too need to be helped, but this help can ‘only proceed given some hope for justice for the dead’.¹⁴ The consolation that salvation brings to the religious person is that spectres get to live another life—they are given back that which was taken from them. In the case of the atheist response, Meillassoux points to its reactive nature in that it takes its point of departure the theist’s definition of God as all-good and all-powerful. He identifies two features of the atheist response: (a) the atheist asks, and it is clear that Meillassoux is in sympathy with this questioning, how can one expect justice of a ‘God who had himself, allowed the worst acts to be committed, in the case of criminal deaths, or who himself had committed them, in the case of natural deaths[?]’.¹⁵ It would be futile to expect justice from the same

⁸ Meillassoux, “The Immanence of the World Beyond”, 451.

⁹ Meillassoux, “Spectral Dilemma”, 263; Meillassoux, “The Immanence of the World Beyond”, 451.

¹⁰ Meillassoux, “The Immanence of the World Beyond”, 452.

¹¹ Meillassoux, “Spectral Dilemma”, 262.

¹² Meillassoux, “Divine Inexistence”, 192.

¹³ Meillassoux, “Spectral Dilemma”, 263; Meillassoux, “The Immanence of the World Beyond”, 458.

¹⁴ Meillassoux, “Spectral Dilemma”, 264.

¹⁵ Meillassoux, “Spectral Dilemma”, 264; Meillassoux, “The Immanence of the World Beyond”, 458.

God who allowed or failed to prevent such injustices in the first place; (b) the atheist questions the way evils are transformed into ‘mysterious’ actions. Here Meillassoux points to the typical inability of theists to explain the occurrence of evil by pointing to God’s ‘unfathomable’ nature; we are asked to accept evil because, given our human limitations, we cannot understand why God permits evil despite his ‘infinite love for us’ and the ‘demand to be loved’. What is particularly noxious about this view is that despite the evils that occur as a result of God’s failure to act, he is still attributed with the qualities of love and justice. For the atheist the use of attractive names not only masks the evils that take place but in addition, they have a poisonous effect upon the person who is asked to believe in a being with the ‘power to make me love evil as if it were the Good’.¹⁶ Believing in the mysterious nature of God is transformative in a negative sense, in that the person undergoes a ‘spiritual death’, an ‘infinite spiritual violence’.¹⁷ Given this effect on the subjectivity of the person, the atheist’s response is emphatic: death without salvation is better than acceding to such a God.

Although atheism and religion position themselves as diametrically opposed to each other, Meillassoux points out that in effect their positions despair at ‘the weakness of the other’¹⁸ with despair, defined as ‘the irreducible separation of justice and being’.¹⁹ Each position despairs at the other: the atheist despairs at the God who allows such evils to occur, while the religious person despairs at the thought that there is no life beyond this world for unjust deaths. The failure of both positions to find a solution to the problem of evil leads to what Meillassoux calls the spectral dilemma, which is defined as ‘the aporetic alternative of atheism and religion when confronted with the mourning of essential spectres’.²⁰ It is this impasse that motivates his search for those conditions that will enable mourning to take place; once resolved, a relation between the living and the dead that is not morbid can be established²¹ since justice would have been fulfilled.

However, the hope for finding a just solution to unjust deaths faces two difficulties: (a) it cannot be realised within the current configuration of the world because it operates according to certain necessary laws of nature and (b) it cannot rely on a transcendent and necessary being who has power to bring about justice. The common problem to both positions is that they rely on the concept of necessity, whether in nature or of God. In order to find a way that will ensure justice for the dead and the living, what needs to be challenged, Meillassoux argues, is the concept of necessity itself.²² The challenge takes the form of a radicalisation from Hume’s well-known critique of the principle of sufficient reason. Hume had famously asked why humans are so convinced that nature is governed by necessary laws given that there is no rational justification for such a belief. There is no contradiction in claiming that whatever happens in the world today might not happen tomorrow even though it happened yesterday.

3 Ontology

The upshot of Meillassoux’s radicalisation of the Humean challenge consists in the further claim that the laws of nature are contingent. As a result, the world is transformed into a space within which different possibilities might come about:

it would be a question of making contingency the absolute property of every being, laws as well as things—a property which a redefined reason, *a reason emancipated from the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, would take as its task to conceive and describe.²³

The introduction of *ex nihilo* arguments is central to Meillassoux’s ontological vision in that it shows that one can rationally explain the emergence of different material configurations in the world without recourse

¹⁶ Meillassoux, “The Immanence of the World Beyond”, 255.

¹⁷ Meillassoux, “Spectral Dilemma”, 265; Meillassoux, “The Immanence of the World Beyond”, 458.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*; *Ibid.*, 457.

¹⁹ Meillassoux, “The Immanence of the World Beyond”, 464.

²⁰ Meillassoux, “Spectral Dilemma”, 265; Meillassoux, “The Immanence of the World Beyond”, 457.

²¹ Meillassoux, “Spectral Dilemma”, 266.

²² *Ibid.*, 272.

²³ Meillassoux, “Spectral Dilemma”, 273; Meillassoux, “Divine Inexistence”, 178.

to religious explanations: ‘Advent *ex nihilo* thus presents itself as the concept par excellence of a world without God, and for that very reason it allows us to produce *an irreligious notion of the origin of pure novelty*’.²⁴ Whereas in the past, the advent of matter, life, and thought were considered ‘mysterious’ and only explicable in religious terms, the concept of *ex nihilo* eliminates such explanations.²⁵ Crucially, for his speculative ontology, what emerges is greater than what it arises from: ‘there is more in the effect than in the cause’.²⁶ This specific understanding of *ex nihilo* is an inversion of the customary form of thinking that places more weight on the cause than the effect. Meillassoux’s use of *ex nihilo* arguments shifts emphasis away from God to the world: ‘the inexistence of God is what unveils the staggering power of novelty of *our own world*’.²⁷ By untying the chain of necessity that has been traditionally associated with God and, furthermore, by introducing *ex nihilo* argument as a way of providing a rational explanation for past emergences, Meillassoux is in a strong position to claim that other possibilities—other Worlds—can emerge.

In his elaboration of these Worlds, Meillassoux distinguishes between the advent of Worlds, the worldly and the intra-worldly. The difference between the World with the capitalised ‘W’ and the world without it is that the former arises non-causally out of the latter. The latter is what he calls the Surchaos at the heart of being and it is a power that *ex nihilo* produces new Worlds that are qualitatively new and superior to what preceded them. The intra-worldly is the space of possibilities operating within an already given World.

There is a sequence to the advent of Worlds. On Meillassoux’s account, the first World is that of matter, and in this respect, Harman points out²⁸ that Meillassoux’s account of matter is ‘ambiguous’ because two versions can be gleaned from *After Finitude*. He asks: (a) does matter appear *ex nihilo* as Meillassoux claims occurs with the advent of life and thought or (b) has matter—in a Parmenidean vein—always existed? I tend to think that the latter provides a better explanation of his account because when explaining *ex nihilo*, Meillassoux writes, ‘By advent *ex nihilo* we do not mean that being arose entirely from originary nothingness’,²⁹ and since there was no ‘originary nothingness’, this suggests that something—matter—was always there. The World of matter is followed by the advent of the World of life and this in turn is followed by the advent of the third World of thought. Each World constitutes a break or rupture from the previous one, and it would seem that Meillassoux holds onto a progressive vision of each successive advent. But while each advent is superior to the one that precedes it, the progress from one to the other does not unfold according to any necessary laws.

With the third World of thought, humans are positioned as superior beings in the world because they know the truth of the contingency of the world; the consequence of having this exclusive knowledge is that no other being can surpass the human.³⁰ As a result, any new advent would be a modification of this existence, rather than a replacement of it; a new World would only be possible if it took into account that which is lacking in the third World, namely justice for the unjust dead – the victims of evil. By confronting evil, we can see Meillassoux’s thought differs from Sinnott-Armstrong³¹ who considers evils as ‘brute givens’ and as constituting objective moral truths (because they damage the victims), but who does not factor into his account the need for justice for the victims. This is not enough for Meillassoux since human thought understands both the injustice of evil and the possibility of universal justice. It is thought which hopes for a fourth World of justice. As Gratton rightly observes, the whole point or ‘telos’ of Meillassoux’s metaphysics is the advent of the ‘divine inexistence’.³²

²⁴ Ibid., 179.

²⁵ Ibid., 180, 187.

²⁶ Ibid., 176-177.

²⁷ Ibid., 177.

²⁸ Harman, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction*, 156.

²⁹ Meillassoux, “Divine Inexistence”, 176.

³⁰ Ibid., 190.

³¹ Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong, *God? A Debate between a Christian and an Atheist*, 33.

³² Gratton, “Meillassoux’s Speculative Politics: Time and the Divinity to Come”, 1.

4 Divine Inexistence, the Messianic

For Meillassoux, the lack of necessity in the world makes possible the advent of God in another World: ‘From this point on, God must be thought as *the contingent, but eternally possible, effect of a Chaos subordinated to any law*’.³³ This is clearly not the position of either religious or atheist thinkers who also subscribe to the concept of necessity in the formulation of their positions on the possibility of rebirth: (a) for the atheist, human progress will necessarily culminate with the mastery over death by a technologically advanced humanity;³⁴ (b) for the religious person justice for the dead will take place when the divine ‘secretly’ emerges.³⁵ Given that Meillassoux has debunked the concept of necessity, he then goes on to claim that the resolution to the problem of evil requires a shift in the analysis away from necessity to that of possibility: what is required ‘is the unknitting of the atheo-religious link between God and necessity (God must or must not exist) and its reattachment to the virtual (God could exist)’.³⁶

Meillassoux’s novel position of the ‘divine inexistence’ entails accepting the ‘legitimate’ religious concern with the ‘*possible resurrection of the dead*’ as well as the atheist concern with the ‘*inexistence of God*’. This novel position can be formulated in the statement ‘*God no longer exists*’³⁷ and it is intended to express two ideas: (a) firstly, the ‘non-existence of the religious God’—this refers to the untenability of the traditional conception of God as a first principle and creator of the world; (b) secondly, the ‘divine character of non-existence’—this suggests that although God does not exist, it is still possible that this being might come into existence.³⁸ With the arrival of God, the natural and moral evils that have been an indictment of the traditional concept of God would no longer be justified for the future God would have had nothing to do with past evils. In addition, the future God would have the power to rectify unjust deaths by bringing the dead back to life.³⁹ Two clarifications are necessary with regard to the expression ‘divine inexistence’: (a) it does not refer to a necessary being who is ‘hidden’ and ‘unknown’, but rather to one who will emerge in the future; (b) it does not refer to humans becoming godlike and achieving power over death.⁴⁰

How is such a radically different world to come about? For a start, it must be pointed out that the emergence of the fourth World is predicated upon the desire for universal justice. This is important because it designates the priority of the human in relation to being; and in articulating this relation, Meillassoux is careful to differentiate between the religious desire for justice from the philosophical one. The religious awaiting of rebirth is directed ‘toward a transcendence that both founds and exceeds ethics’;⁴¹ it is an ethic that displaces the desire for justice with the desire for a ‘divinized Real’, which is another way of saying the desire for the ‘power of being’. This is, in effect, a desire for a transcendent being, a desire that subordinates humans to a higher form of power. Meillassoux’s philosophical vision replaces a transcendent being with the immanent power of the world. This philosophical vision expresses ‘an immanent perfection of justice through which the human could live indefinitely in the world that has emerged, with no possible beyond’.⁴² Questions have been raised concerning Meillassoux’s dismissal of the transcendent: (a) Žižek⁴³ argues that Meillassoux is too quick to dismiss the transcendental on the grounds that he ‘overlooks’ [the way] his materialist critique also open[s] up the path for a new divinity’.⁴⁴ But just because Meillassoux argues for the emergence of a ‘new divinity’ this does not imply that the ‘new divinity’ is a transcendent being; in fact, this is precisely the opposite of what Meillassoux is arguing for; (b) in agreement with Žižek, Mason

³³ Meillassoux, “Spectral Dilemma”, 274.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 270.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 269.

³⁷ Meillassoux, “Spectral Dilemma”, 268; Meillassoux, “The Immanence of the World Beyond”, 458.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Meillassoux, “Spectral Dilemma”, 291.

⁴¹ Meillassoux, “Divine Inexistence”, 222.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 222-223.

⁴³ Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, 646.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

and O'Rourke argue that Meillassoux's inability to eliminate the transcendental 'constitutes, ironically a fideistic position'⁴⁵ while at the same time they take issue with his critique of fideism⁴⁶ by ascribing a fideist position to him. However, Meillassoux's critique of fideism is a critique of what is commonly known as 'blind' faith, a faith that has been strengthened by those philosophical movements that disclaim the possibility of attaining absolute knowledge. Given the inability of reason to penetrate the world, the door to the irrationality of faith has been opened. But Meillassoux's philosophy is precisely the opposite: it is a rational endeavour that enables one to acquire knowledge of the world and with this knowledge create the possibility of hope—as opposed to faith—in the divine.⁴⁷

The question that remains concerns the way the universal of justice as the highest human possibility should be connected with the advent of the fourth World. For Meillassoux, the connection requires some kind of 'link' that will be established through 'a gesture towards emergence itself, *which amounts to a requirement that the advent of the universal should be incarnated*'.⁴⁸ In other words, the realisation of justice requires the appearance of someone who will bring about justice in the fourth World. The Messiah is the incarnation of a 'human mediator' with the power to resurrect those who have suffered unjust deaths. To reinforce his philosophic/immanent vision—as opposed to a religious/transcendent one—Meillassoux identifies the Messiah with the figure of the child⁴⁹ as the embodied power of contingency. Niemoczynski suggests that there are two figures involved in the advent of the fourth World of justice: the child and a Christ-like messianic figure'.⁵⁰ In my understanding, these are one and the same, for the child is the link between the third and fourth Worlds who not only has the power to redress the injustices that have occurred through rebirth but, crucially, is also ready to abandon this power once this task has been completed. This is crucial because (a) having such an incredible non-human power is amoral and (b) this will show that s/he is equal to everyone else. It is the child who fulfils the gesture of linking the third to the fourth World, of linking the hope in being and the hope in humanity.⁵¹ Niemoczynski's discussion of the 'structure of the Messiah'⁵² situates Meillassoux in close proximity to Caputo's and Kearney's views of the possible God, but the abandoning of power by the Child-Messiah constitutes a fundamental difference between them. It could be claimed that child-Messiah's constitutes a 'vertical transcendence' given that he/she has the power to bring about rebirth as well as abandoning this power. This claim would be justified if one is here using the expression 'vertical transcendence' to mean different from everyone else. The child-Messiah is different – for a while – from other humans, but the more important point for Meillassoux is that his/her emergence is generated from within the world and hence the claim of immanence.

It is worth repeating the 'determinations' that Meillassoux lists as being required of the mediator:

1. The mediator ought to be a person whose action is guided by the universal ('goodness').
2. This person must possess the knowledge or memory of the singular becoming of the living and the dead ('omniscience').
3. This person has the power to voluntarily accomplish the rebirth of the dead ('omnipotence').
4. This person has the power to abolish definitively their own former posers (namely, their own omniscience or omnipotence').
5. As a final attribute following from the first four, the mediator actually and definitively abolishes their own power once the rebirth occurs'.⁵³

⁴⁵ Mason and O'Rourke, "Meillassoux's Messianicity", 49.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁷ Meillassoux, "Divine Inexistence", 168.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁴⁹ Caputo also introduces the child into his account asking, 'What would it be like were there a politics of and for the children, who are the future...?' (Mason and O'Rourke, "Meillassoux's Messianicity", 55).

⁵⁰ Niemoczynski, "Child", 42.

⁵¹ Meillassoux, "Divine Inexistence", 225.

⁵² Niemoczynski, "Speculating God: Speculative Realism and Meillassoux's Divine Inexistence".

⁵³ Meillassoux, "Divine Inexistence", 224.

In an interesting and generally sympathetic paper on *The Hope of Speculative Materialism*⁵⁴ Burns finds ‘one of the major shortcomings of Meillassoux’s divinology’⁵⁵ for the philosophy of religion to be that he thinks of God as a possible future existence as opposed to a more constructive approach that considers God as the name for possibility itself (rather than a possible God). This point begs the question of whether Meillassoux considers his project within the framework of the philosophy of religion. More seriously, Burns points out that the problem with Meillassoux’s thinking on the subject is the ‘absolute lack of relationality’⁵⁶ between the God-to-arrive and the world or others. But there is a good reason for this: the relational God Burns speaks of comes across as the God of monotheistic religions, the God who Meillassoux considers responsible for the evils in the world. The future God is different in that this God has the power to redeem injustice and the will to abandon his/her power once universal justice has been implemented in the fourth World. Unlike the kind of God Burns seems to have in mind, this is not the kind of God one has a personal relationship with.

5 Rebirth and Immortality

The concepts of rebirth and immortality are introduced as the only way of rectifying the injustice of natural and moral evil. But their introduction is connected to a persistent motif in Meillassoux’s thought, namely, that philosophy is not merely a theoretical or textual exercise but one that affects the entire being of the person. In other words, anyone who seriously accepts his ontological position would re-think the way they conducted their life. Ontology and ethics are intertwined such that this ‘event [can] modify my subjectivity once it is recognised as possible’.⁵⁷ What Meillassoux calls the ‘transformation[s] of subjectivity’ is especially evident in ‘the vectorial subject’⁵⁸ who believes that universal justice will be accomplished with the emergence of the fourth World: as a result, the despair generated by the spectral dilemma is overcome.

The legitimate question to ask is: in what kind of world would rebirth and immortality be possible since clearly it cannot happen within the current configuration of the third World? The radicalism of this idea requires an equally radical World to accommodate it, and this explains why Meillassoux considers the possibility of rebirth as conceptually connected to the possibility of a qualitatively new World, one that ‘ought to be distinguished as a fourth World [and] ‘this World could only be that of the rebirth of humans’.⁵⁹ Given the unjust deaths of the third World, the fourth World will be the World of justice, one in which immortality acts as ‘the guarantor of universal equality’.⁶⁰

The fourth World will be the advent of a qualitatively superior world because all the victims of unjust deaths would be finally redressed: ‘it is only the world of the rebirth of humans *that makes universal justice possible, by erasing even the injustice of shattered lives*’.⁶¹ There are two arguments that provide the basis for Meillassoux’s theses on rebirth: (a) the first argument is that it is the contingency of the world that constitutes the basis for the possibility of rebirth: ‘Since everything logically possible is really possible, then since *the rebirth of bodies* is not illogical it must also be possible’.⁶² The claim that rebirth is not illogical comes across as outrageous given our experience of life and death. Its justification is firmly tied to his ontology: if one accepts the world as a space of absolute possibilities, then, literally, anything is possible – and this includes the rebirth of humans. Meillassoux reminds us that what Pascal considered really strange was not rebirth, but the actuality of our birth in the first place; and the possibility of rebirth is connected to his arguments for the child-Messiah who ‘fulfils, for the first time, *a condition of hope for the*

⁵⁴ Burns, “The Hope of Speculative Materialism”, 316-334.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 331.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 323.

⁵⁷ Meillassoux, “Interview with Quentin Meillassoux”, 172.

⁵⁸ Meillassoux, “The Immanence of the World Beyond”, 462-464.

⁵⁹ Meillassoux, “Divine Inexistence”, 189.

⁶⁰ Meillassoux, “The Immanence of the World Beyond”, 462.

⁶¹ Meillassoux, “Divine Inexistence”, 190-191.

⁶² Ibid., 189.

resurrection of the dead'.⁶³ (b) The second argument is that while the third World of thought is the pinnacle of human existence to date, thought also recognises the limits of the human, that is, their mortality. For some, the consequences of knowing their mortality is debilitating—it can lead either to inaction or to frenzied hedonism; but for Meillassoux this knowledge is transformative in that 'the negative knowledge of our mortality thus refers to the positive knowledge of our possible rebirth'.⁶⁴ The concept of rebirth is therefore not some extravagant desire originating in the desire for self-preservation, but grounded in the recognition of both the contingency of the world and the possibility of transcending human mortality.

Justice can be achieved by giving back to the victims what was taken from them, to wit, their life. Moreover, the implementation of justice should not be restrictive in scope: it is a universal value that applies equally to all humans, for all times. It must therefore be extended to include *all* those who have died unjustly and therefore it 'also summons our refusal of injustice for the dead, for recent or ancient deaths, for known and unknown deaths. For the universal is universal only when it makes no exceptions'.⁶⁵ This is quite a demanding, but consistent, expectation: if justice is a universal value, its range of application cannot be limited to a specific period of time (for example, the last one hundred years) as this would create an injustice for those who suffered before. Not all are ready to include past injustices: Norton (2014),⁶⁶ for example, is critical of Meillassoux and suggests that Latour's concept of 'divine instauration' provides a better account of religion insofar as it is 'practice-oriented'. While this might be the case, Norton's defence of Latour fails to take into account those who have died unjustly and it would seem that this is not an important issue for him.

Given Meillassoux's ontology, the question that needs to be tackled concerns the relationship for the victim between the third World of thought and the fourth World of justice. Meillassoux introduces the concept of memory to connect both worlds and this is important for two reasons: (a) without their memories the rebirth of the victims would be a chance and lucky event, rather than the fulfilment of justice. As memory is a key constitutive feature in the identity of the reborn person, by enabling him/her to remember past sufferings, their rebirth is understood as a redressing of their unjust deaths. This is why the World of Justice is not a heavenly paradise populated by smiling people but a World 'weighed down with the memory of humans';⁶⁷ (b) the advent of the fourth World is not an eternal return of the same, that is, an identical repetitive recommencement of the human, but 'the sudden advent of a *new World or new space of novelties*'.⁶⁸ The point is that since the life of the victim terminated before its time, it was therefore incomplete, so their rebirth in the fourth World would enable it to be completed: it will be 'the hidden resumption of the course of our existence, charged with the memory of its past'.⁶⁹

The questions of rebirth and immortality are not new to either the religions of the West or the East. But the way they specify rebirth and immortality differs significantly from that of Meillassoux who does not conceptualise rebirth as occurring in a world 'beyond' (as in monotheist religions) or within this world, whether as a human or some other form of life (as in Oriental religions). The difference between religious ethics and his immanent ethics is that the latter '*posits this life as the only desirable life*'.⁷⁰ This is a crucial point, for while religious ethics promises 'some other life', immanent ethics centralises immortality as 'an ethics of human life without a beyond precisely *because* it is immortal'.⁷¹ Immortality within the fourth World would be the culmination of immanent ethics:

*Immortality is the philosophical desire for life, the desire that this human life and no other should again and always be lived. Philosophy wants a life without a beyond, and that is why philosophical ethics must be an ethics of immortality, that is to say, an ethics of life with no elsewhere.*⁷²

⁶³ Ibid., 192.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 211.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 192.

⁶⁶ Norton, "The Spectral Dilemma and the Instauration of the Divine: Latour contra Meillassoux."

⁶⁷ Meillassoux, "Divine Inexistence", 221.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 216.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 187.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

It is clear that for Meillassoux the life of immortality is not lived in some atemporal and non-spatial Platonic or Christian realm, and in this sense both immortality and the fourth World do not transcend this world. The concept of immanence is justified on the grounds that the fourth World is ‘added’ onto the third World in the same way as the third World is ‘added’ onto the previous one.⁷³ While each World constitutes a ‘layer’ upon the previous one, Meillassoux adds that ‘the genuine experience of immanence is not possible within the current world’.⁷⁴ He explains this by distinguishing between the current third World that is real but not immanent from the real and immanent fourth World in which humans are no longer subjected to ‘biological mortality’. In this respect, it is immortality that marks the real and immanent world. It would not be misleading to speak of transcendence only if it is spoken about in the narrow sense where we can say that humans have ‘transcended’ their condition, not by moving outside the spatio-temporal configuration of the world, but by moving beyond its current ‘biological limitation’.⁷⁵ However, although the fourth World is characterised by immortality, Meillassoux qualifies this view by claiming that this does eliminate the possibility of death; it remains a possibility, but it would not be the result of the current biological nature of humans who age and die. Death in the fourth World is a ‘pure possibility’ because in principle it might never arrive, but it is a ‘real’ possibility if we voluntarily end our life.

There is an added crucial feature to Meillassoux’s account of immortality: so far, he has only claimed immortality for those who are reborn into the fourth World. What will happen to the rest of humanity, to those who have died over the course of time? These would, presumably, also desire immortality but he claims this desire is not grounded in the popular view that humans desire immortality because they fear death. Rather he shifts the argument for immortality towards the hope for the fourth World of justice, since it is this hope that indirectly will bring about their own rebirth and immortality.

All human beings—and not only those who suffer a terrible death—have therefore to participate in thought and in action in the universal community of the fourth world. *All must in the final instance want to return*: the desire for immortality whose basic characteristics we initially refuse (as an anthropological *fact*) is founded in this instance upon the universal law, in its post-nihilist constitution.⁷⁶

There is an important qualification here: everyone and not just the unjust dead can expect rebirth and immortality. It is important for two reasons: (a) those who died naturally as part of the ageing process in the third World will also be entitled to participate and contribute towards the creation of a just World through their rebirth and immortality. To exclude them on the grounds that they were not victims of ‘terrible deaths’ would create an imbalance between those whose life ended naturally (and therefore permanently) and those who died unnaturally but whose rebirth and immortality is unending; (b) it would allow all those who are reborn to share their lives with those whom they lived with in the third World. Imagine the scenario of a child stuck down by a terminal illness in the third World and who is reborn within the fourth World without his parents. This unpleasant scenario is avoided now since the parents will also be reborn and therefore share in the life of the child.

Before concluding, it is worth examining Jim Urpeth’s critique of Meillassoux in ‘Religious Immanence’⁷⁷ insofar as he considers Meillassoux’s solution to the problem of evil as a non-starter. The basis of Urpeth’s critique lies in his identification of religion with the immanent world characterised by two key features: impersonality and amorality. This ‘religion of immanence’ entails a rejection of the concept of religion that has been used exclusively (within Western culture) in terms of monotheism and transcendence. Given his definition of religion, it is not surprising that Meillassoux’s concept of the ‘divine inexistence’ is excluded

⁷³ Norton has pointed out that in effect the fourth World as articulated by Meillassoux is really a ‘transcendent one’ because it is a World different and superior to the third World (Norton, “The Spectral Dilemma and the Instauration of the Divine”). I think that the sense of transcendence that Meillassoux is using is narrower in that it refers to what we might consider a Platonic or Christian realm as opposed to a temporal or immanent realm.

⁷⁴ Meillassoux, “The Immanence of the World Beyond”, 468.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 468-469.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 474.

⁷⁷ Urpeth, “Religious Immanence”, 47-61.

from Urpeth's account since the concept of transcendence does not belong within the discourse of religion, so that including it within the category of religion constitutes a 'category mistake'. There is no denying that while Meillassoux is thinking within the tradition of Western philosophical theology, as is evidenced by his concern with the problem of evil, for Urpeth the problem of evil is a pseudo-problem. Understanding the immanent nature of the world means understanding that it is this world that generates what humans would call good and evil, or justice and injustice. On the religious immanent account, not only the goods of this world, but also any 'monstrosities' generated by it must be accepted for what they are—impersonal forces that have nothing to do with humans. As a result, there can be no moral condemnation or 'negative evaluation' of the world since this is how the world is. To pass a negative judgement on the world would place one within the mind-set of transcendental religions, a mind-set that, according to Urpeth, Meillassoux inhabits and one that, is clearly opposed to a religion of immanence that has no place for 'hope' or the 'future' within it. While 'hope' and the 'future' are redundant terms for the religion of immanence, its vision seems rather bleak (although this might not count against it) insofar as there seems to be no justification for intervening in, for example, natural events (to call them disasters would be an anthropomorphization of the world). These are impersonal events occurring in the world, and if thousands die why should anyone intervene in events that are part of the way the world is; indifference towards the world would be the appropriate existential-evaluative stance towards it.

The success of Urpeth's critique depends to a large degree upon the rejection of Meillassoux's philosophical vision of the world as necessarily contingent and the question is: on what grounds can this vision be rejected? There is no clear-cut rebuttal insofar as Urpeth opposes Meillassoux's 'intellectual intuition' of the world with the 'affective intuition' of the religion of immanence. The rebuttal in effect amounts to a decision for one position without sufficient reasons for choosing one over the other, other than saying that Meillassoux's philosophy is framed within the issues of traditional monotheism. But this on its own does not warrant rejecting his philosophy. In addition, Urpeth's valorisation of the religious aspect of immanence raises the question as to why he would want to call the immanent world 'religious' in the first place. Why not just call it an 'impersonal and amoral world' or 'a metaphysics of impersonal forces and amoral views'? What is the origin of this need to use the terminology of religion given that the 'religion of immanence' wants to do without any of the concepts (for example, afterlife) traditionally associated with any religion, pagan or otherwise?

6 Critical Considerations

In this section I want to raise some questions concerning the implications of Meillassoux's theses on rebirth and immortality:

- (a) *The question of entitlement.* The question here concerns those who are entitled to rebirth and immortality. As discussed above, it would seem that everyone is entitled to rebirth and immortality insofar as the implementation of justice for unjust deaths entails that their lives be completed and accompanied by those who form part of their lives before their unjust death. But this does not mean, as Harman points out, that the World of justice would include 'narcissistic and psychopathic killers'.⁷⁸ While Harman points out that Meillassoux leaves this issue 'unaddressed', I think that, given what he has said about justice, it is clear that not everyone is entitled to rebirth and immortality because universal justice functions as a standard that can be used to exclude some persons from the fourth World. I think that those who are responsible for unjust deaths in the first place should be excluded from the fourth World of justice without any possibility of redemption; I cannot envisage a scenario where a serial killer or dictator – even if redeemed – occupies the same place as the victims. This is not an issue discussed by Meillassoux but I think consistency requires it. Another related issue raised by Harman concerns the 'Sadeian libertine' who takes pleasure in torturing and killing others, justifying his behaviour by saying

⁷⁸ Harman, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction*, 162.

that the victims will be reborn anyway while he has ‘no afterlife to fear’.⁷⁹ The only difficulty I see in this is that if the ‘Sadeian libertine’ believes that the victims will be reborn then he is implicitly believing in a fourth World of justice in which he will not have a place. And even if he believes in the fourth World and not care about it, preferring death to immortality, then, justice would still be fulfilled since only the victims would be reborn and immortal.

- (b) *The question of memory.* Meillassoux argues that there is an element of continuity between Worlds established by the notion of memory. This is important because the recognition of the fourth World as one where justice has prevailed necessitates that the victims remember what they had been through and why they have been reborn. Their rebirth is justified on these grounds and this explains why it cannot apply to those who died of natural causes (such as ageing). The question that needs to be asked is the following: would one want to be reminded of the painful experience one went through, even if one is reborn on the basis of this experience? Is this not also painful? It might be argued that remembering the experience, rather than denying it, is necessary towards achieving some form of closure. This might be the case, but not necessarily; perhaps for some, the pain of their experience is an open wound that can never come to an end, and rebirth with painful memories and an immortal existence might translate into an eternal nightmare.
- (c) *The question of the material and structural configuration of the fourth World.* If the possibility of rebirth logically follows from understanding the contingency of the world, then one may ask: will the material and structural configuration of the fourth World be the same as that of the third World? In other words, will the fourth World also be subjected to earthquakes, hurricanes, etc.; or will rebirth be accompanied by such a different World such that it is immune from natural catastrophes? The difficulty is that Meillassoux has claimed that each World is constituted by the previous World with the World of thought emerging out of World of life, and this in turn out of the World of matter; the bottom line is that the World as a material structure of interrelated elements constitutes the basis of the contingency of the World. Should the fourth World actually emerge, would it still be prone to the natural injustices evidenced in the third World? Or would the fourth World not be subjected to natural disasters? What would happen to the victims of natural injustices in the fourth World if the child-Messiah can only bring rebirth to the victims of injustice in the third World? Can they be reborn in the fourth World without the need of the child-Messiah? Given that the child-Messiah would have abandoned his power once the injustices of the third World have been redeemed what would happen to these new unjust dead?
- (d) *The logistical question.* The question that comes to mind with the advent of the fourth World is a mundane one: with the rebirth of all the unjust deaths that have occurred throughout history, how would all these persons actually live? Given that rebirth is a bodily one, then the fourth World must also have not only adequate, but abundant material resources for all the reborn to - at the very minimum - survive. Can the fourth World maintain such an influx of persons together with those who are born in the fourth World? Immortality, in this World, is for all past and future inhabitants, so how will it be possible to feed, clothe and house all these persons? For such a vision to be implemented it must assume a world of unlimited resources. One way of circumventing this difficulty is by arguing that if an event of such unprecedented importance occurs - the rebirth of the unjust dead - then we must take it for granted that ensuring the material conditions for all is something the Child-Messiah can also achieve.
- (e) *The question of injustice.* It has been pointed out that Meillassoux restricts his definition of justice to those who have suffered unjust deaths. On his account while there are other forms of injustice unjust deaths constitute the worst form of injustice, and hence deserve their being labelled as evil. This label is not hard to agree with, but by restricting his definition of justice in this way, he removes from the scope of justice other equally important injustices (hunger, exploitation). The question is simple: are those who die as a consequence of other forms of injustice eligible for rebirth? On Meillassoux’s account it would seem that that they are not eligible since these deaths do not fall within the class of natural and moral evils. But somehow this seems at odds with our sense of justice: surely those who have suffered and died as a result of other forms of injustice all their lives deserve rebirth and immortality too?

⁷⁹ Ibid.

- (f) *The question of systemic moral evil.* In his examples of the moral evils that humans inflict intentionally upon each other, Meillassoux feels outraged by the suffering and helplessness endured by the victims and he rightly points to the singularity of each victim as a life that has been cruelly ended. What might be missing from this depiction is an account of systemic moral evil; in other words, a good number of moral evils can be attributed to the socio-economic - capitalist - system that pervades most contemporary societies. I would not hesitate to label it as a morally evil system given the inequalities and injustices it produces, but for Meillassoux, the fourth World provides no respite from the injustices of the capitalist system. This is evident from the typology of living conditions in the fourth World that he provides.⁸⁰ There are the lives of (a) misery, revolving around the pains associated with the body ('hunger, illness, violent death'); (b) disquiet where one can live free from pain and can therefore enjoy 'in all plenitude the throes of love, friendship and creation'; and (c) suffering where one is aware of the lives of misery and disquiet. What we realize from Meillassoux's account is that the fourth World of justice is not a happy place and, given that life in the fourth World is immortal (unless voluntarily ended), would such a life - immortal and hungry or ill - constitute a desirable state of affairs? On this account, not only does the misery brought about by the capitalist system remain in place in fourth World but is perhaps aggravated by it.
- (g) *The question of the possible.* The question can be stated as follows: given the centrality of the concept of possibility in the advent of Worlds it is always possible that rather than a fourth World of justice, there is a return to the first World of matter. Meillassoux's account of the emergence of Worlds demonstrates a progression from one World to the next and this sequence is justified by examining the pattern of emergences that have already taken place. But is it necessarily the case that the emergent World is superior to its previous one? While it is true that Meillassoux has often stressed the *ex nihilo* emergence of Worlds to claim that what emerges is greater than what preceded it, is this consistent with his principle of factuality i.e., the necessity of contingency? Doesn't this principle insist strictly on the world as a space within which anything is possible? If this is the case then just as the fourth World of justice is a possibility that emerges from the third World of thought, it is equally possible that the next World regresses to an earlier state, or perhaps be reduced to some state inconceivable to humans. With this line of thinking, Gratton suggests that it is possible that the being that emerges in the fourth World is a demonic one rather than the child-Messiah who will implement justice.⁸¹ These are moments when the progressivism implicit in Meillassoux's vision sits uncomfortably with the contingent world to which it is applied. This issue leads to another question: given the possibility of its non-emergence what is the rationality for our hope in the fourth World? Some might argue that it is precisely this non-emergence that gives hope in the fourth World its value. Without this possible non-emergence, the emergence of the fourth World would belong to the register of certainty whereas the domain of the possible belongs to the register of hope. But while the category of the possible provides the conditions of hope, the further claim that this hope can be rationally grounded remains a bit tenuous.

7 Conclusion

It is clear that the problem of evil and the desire for justice motivates Meillassoux's writings on the divine inexistence. His dissatisfaction with traditional theistic and atheistic responses has led him to formulate a novel third position grounded in his immanent vision of the world as constituting the condition of possibility for the emergence of a world within which evil injustices will be overcome; the resolution of injustice entails accepting Meillassoux's broader speculative vision. The purpose of this paper has been that of reconstructing in a systematic way this vision from the texts that, to date, deal with the problem of evil and its resolution. Towards this end, I have discussed some of the critiques directed at his theses as well as introducing some critical questions which leave me to ask whether these questions constitute a sufficient reason for abandoning Meillassoux's solution to the problem of evil.

⁸⁰ Meillassoux, "The Immanence of the World Beyond", 469-470.

⁸¹ Gratton, *Speculative Realism: Problems and Prospects*, 84.

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