

A Formal Ontological Game. Does Meillassoux's Speculative Realism Need a Correlation?*

Jan Voosholz

1. Posing a question

Quentin Meillassoux dismisses the question of the right correlation both in his *After finitude* and in subsequent publications because his work aims to refute correlationism. The central question I want to address in this article is: Does Meillassoux's position (and the New Realisms more generally) need a correlation to be more than just a formal ontological game? My answer to this question will be a no, but I think that both his and other versions of speculative and new realism need an interconnection between us and the things around us.

I begin with the notion of correlation according to Meillassoux. A correlation – as I understand the term in Meillassoux's writings – consists of at least one *dyad* (*triad*, ...) of basic philosophical concepts which are ontologically inseparable. As Meillassoux states in *After Finitude*: "Correlationism consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realm of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another."¹

Thus, one concept's intelligibility rests on that of the other(s) and vice versa. We need the notion of subjectivity for objectivity and the other way around. Which concepts are involved varies widely depending on the position in question, yet one is always concerned with mind, consciousness or subjects and one with objects, things or the world. The specific concepts involved together with the way they are linked together constitutes a specific correlation. There are at least in principle indefinitely many possible correlations. Any one defines the core of a specific correlationist ontology.

Unarguably, correlationism is a complex subject matter. For the purpose of this paper this simple working definition of correlationism and correlation will hopefully suffice. So what is Meillassoux's idea for a speculative materialism and realism?

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¹ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (New York: Continuum, 2008), p. 5.

On the one hand, Meillassoux wants his philosophy to be interpreted as a refutation of correlationism from within: He assumes a correlationist standpoint against dogmatic metaphysics and “subjectalism”.² Subjectalism is Meillassoux’s umbrella term for subjective and absolute idealism (Berkeley, Hegel, Post-Hegelians) and vitalism (Nietzsche, Deleuze). In subjectalism, one aspect of life or mind is central to an absolute correlation. For instance, for Hegel there seems to be the total and absolute correlation which he names *Weltgeist* between the world (*Welt*) and the mind (*Geist*) – this means a correlation governing everything including any other correlations. Meillassoux uses correlationistic arguments to refute classical metaphysics and subjectalism. So, Meillassoux wants to carry the flag of anti-metaphysical thought further.³ He also does not seem to have a problem with the idea of correlationism when it comes to our mundane dealings in everyday life. His disagreement with correlationism focuses on the ontological level.

On the other side, he takes what I would call a meta-correlationist stance. He finds discussion about the wrong and right correlations unproductive for the development of a new realist and speculative materialist position. All the arguments exchanged by phenomenology, postmodernism, the analytic-transcendental tradition and subjectalism “overshadowed the necessity of not in turn participating in this confrontation, but of changing the terrain.”⁴ Meillassoux is interested in this change of terrain, and with realist and materialist thought reemerging, he has succeeded in my opinion. The main reason for his meta-correlationist stance is Meillassoux’s refusal to invite any ontological or epistemological anti-realism. Under no circumstances does he want to become a correlationist.

He sides with the correlationists against common adversaries, e.g. classical metaphysics. He employs the correlationist circle. And then he takes the meta-correlationist stance. This poses the problem in question: Does Meillassoux’s speculative realism lack a correlation? If so, can we conclude that all new and speculative realist philosophies need a correlation for similar reasons?

2. Formal ontological games

The answer, I reckon, is strongly connected to our expectations of what a new realist philosophy aims to achieve. Meillassoux articulates this in his question of ancestry.⁵ When I turn to the ancestral problem of Meillassoux I see at least two different interpretations: As a problem in philosophy of science, more accurately

² For this term see Quentin Meillassoux, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition. A Speculative Analysis of the Sign Devoid of Meaning”, in Avanesian/Malik (ed.), *Genealogies of Speculation* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 117–198.

³ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 53.

⁴ Quentin Meillassoux, “Iteration”, p. 123

⁵ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, Chap. 1.

any science of objective dating and time, and as an ontological problem. I think the second reading of the problem is the deeper one.

The first interpretation puts the problem like this: How are correlationists able to explain ancestral events like the big bang or the formation of our solar system? These are – as physics describes them – events involving objects without the possibility of a correlating subject. So correlationism can either contradict its own premises or be antirealistic concerning many entities of natural scientific discourse (eternal laws of nature, ancestral events, and so on).

The second interpretation cuts deeper. Here the question is: How is the givenness of any possible correlation thinkable without a *creatio ex nihilo*? In other words: How can a correlationist disregard all external and objective preconditions of our subjectivity and dismiss their absolute independence and reality? For instance, can a transcendental philosopher like Kant explain the logical possibility of the ontogenesis of subjectivity within a mind-independent world while claiming that space and time depend on the correlation between subjectivity and objectivity? I call this the ontological reading of the ancestral problem since it is concerned with objective conditions of subjectivity and mind-independent reality. Therefore, it is separable from any particular scientific discourse, modern day physics for example.

The second reading of the ancestral question cuts deeper for two reasons: Firstly, it does not presuppose any particular scientific hypothesis concerning the creation of the external world. And secondly, it shows a lack of ontological, epistemological and scientific realism in correlationism while the first reading focuses only on the latter aspect.

Meillassoux's basic idea for solving the ancestral problem can be summed up like this: He wants to show that external reality has at all times to be non-contradictory (which he deduces from his *Principle of Unreason* and the concept of *Hyperchaos*) and exists independently of any subjectivity if it does exist at all.

Following this, he presents an argument that objects of the external world have primary qualities – qualities utterly independent of subjectivity and the human mind. These qualities are, according to Meillassoux, non-contradictory and mathematical qualities, such as form, position in space-time, etc. He then suggests in *After Finitude* that obviously we all, especially the natural sciences, know about the mathematical properties of certain objects in the universe. Ergo we know some primary qualities and thus have access to the external world.

Yet, he does not introduce an explicit epistemology or philosophy of science that describes *how* we know these things. Nor does he put forward a philosophy of mind to present a model for our subjectivity and its ability to know and act in general. I presume this is due to the fact that he does not wish to abandon his meta-correlationist stance and get into the messy business of outlining the details of any connection of our subjectivity to the factual and actual world around us.

I argue that any form of realism has to answer the question of the right connection between our subjectivity and objective reality if it wants to be more

than just a formal ontological game. With the notion of a *formal ontological game* I designate any philosophy with an elaborated, solid ontological foundation which, however, does not acknowledge the need for (or even the allowance of) a more detailed epistemology, philosophy of mind and science. A formal ontological game is not wrong. Yet it loses its appeal as a system because it does not have (or want) any contact with our (f)actual world. A formal ontological game merely considers its possibility.

My argument is that, in order to give a full account not only of *ontological* but also of *epistemological and scientific* realism, and so to answer the ancestral question completely, some form of interconnection is needed: The way our subjectivity enters the picture of mind-independent reality has a vast impact on the resulting epistemology and philosophy of science. For any realist project such as Meillassoux's we ought to be ontological and epistemological realists. And not only epistemological realists but also scientific realists: only all three positions together can provide the answer to the ancestral problem (in my second reading) without the realist in question becoming a reductionist – or a correlationist again. We need to explain the genesis as well as the logical constitution of our connection to the objective world and the objective preconditions of our subjectivity. In *Potentiality and Virtuality* Meillassoux⁶ argues that life and thought are not actualizations of a potentiality of the inorganic. Rather, he writes, they emerged *ex nihilo* as a real novelty. Yet, he does not address the question of how this is possible, but only states *that* it is possible.

3. The periodic table of things

3.1. A most perfect ontology

I would like to sketch four questions that need to be answered if we want to be epistemological and scientific realists. Let us assume for the sake of the argument that I could prove every external object has certain primary qualities. Moreover, assume I could present to you an argument which clearly shows that all primary qualities of any external object, for the present moment in time, only derive from the external object's position on the *periodic table of things*.

Imagine every object had something like an atomic number, an object number. Only this particular object has this object number. And the number has a distinct place on my periodic table of things. Suppose that such an infinite periodic table of things, quite like the periodic table of chemical elements, exists. Furthermore, I could give good reasons for the necessity of this periodic table – not only under

⁶ Quentin Meillassoux, "Potentiality and Virtuality", in *Collapse II* (2007), 55–81, here pp. 77–81.

our current natural laws, but the ontological necessity under any non-contradictory natural laws, even under instable laws of nature.

Because external objects constantly change their position in space-time constantly, they end their existence comes to an end (by shattering into pieces for example) giving rise in turn to the existence of independent new objects (said pieces, for example), the periodic table of things is not only infinitely large but also in constant change. Suppose I could give you a perfect explanation for the process of the emergence and destruction of external objects without running into any problems with substances like so many other materialisms. And – finally – I could prove to you that for any given object number we could find on this periodic table of things every primary quality this object has at the moment when you are looking at the table.

3.2. Four pressing questions

Even if I had ironclad arguments for all those claims, I would still be at a loss to explain how anyone could identify this particular external object with its position on the periodic table of things. I would have to give you a method for knowing the primary qualities by giving you a reliable method for knowing the object's atomic number. This is the first question: Which method is used to gain knowledge of primary qualities?

Also, you could ask me how secondary qualities enter the picture. Are they at all related to the periodic table of things? I would have to present an answer to this question because we are interested in those qualities too. Much of philosophy and life deals with secondary qualities. That is the second question: What about secondary qualities?

Then you would ask me about all those other things which are not on the periodic table: relations, abstract concepts, past objects, future objects, theoretical objects, the periodic table of things itself. These are all significant problems, which leads to the third question: What is the status of objects without primary qualities in reality?

Lastly, you could ask me if subjects feature on this periodic table – and if I am a reductionist who thinks they are all mere physical bodies, and that secondary qualities are only some kind of 'special effect' of primary qualities, which I explain in terms of a supervenience relation, etc. So: How to explain the empirical genesis of subjects, and what are their logical conditions and their positions within reality?

If I could not give answers to these four questions – the epistemic method, the subject-related qualities, the status of abstract and non-present objects and the genesis, conditions and position of subjects – my ironclad ontology would be a formal ontological game. This is not to say that it could not be extremely interesting and relevant as a huge step forward to overcome correlationism. But the *PTT* is not an ontology capable of becoming widely shared in philosophy, the natural and

social sciences or society. What is more, the *PTT* cannot answer Meillassoux's ancestral question on the deeper reading, because the *PTT* only permits me to claim ontological realism, not epistemological or scientific realism. It might be a great point of departure for the project of new and speculative realism. It is not its final realization.

When I consider my four questions carefully, they can be subdivided.⁷ The first, the methodological question, concerning how we can know actual primary qualities of objects, points us in the direction of epistemology, and, more precisely, of philosophy of science. One part of this problem are the primary qualities of past and future objects; in other words, a definitive solution to Meillassoux's ancestral problem on the scientific reading. I think the methodological question of science is an important point in the discussion of new and speculative realism, which sometimes does not get the attention it deserves.

The three other questions about secondary qualities, abstract objects and the genesis, logical conditions and position of the subjects can be grouped together. Secondary qualities only exist when there is an interconnection between subjects and objects. Possibly, some abstract objects exist only if thought exists. At least for non-mathematical abstract objects such as fictional objects or moral values, subjects and intersubjectivity seem to be necessary. So I would argue that these two questions can only be settled together with the question of the emergence (*surgissement*) of subjects and the position of subjects in the world, that is, their interconnection with objects of any kind and with one another.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Other new and speculative realisms

This paper is mainly concerned with Meillassoux. But there are other new and speculative realists who apply the two strategies I mentioned earlier simultaneously: the correlationistic contesting of dogmatic metaphysics and subjectalism as well as the meta-correlationist stance in ontology. Here philosophers like Graham Harman, Ian Hamilton Grant, as do the earlier works of Ray Brassier (before he became a Sellarsian) come to mind, but also in a way Maurizio Ferraris or Sandra Lehmann. I want to contrast Meillassoux's silent position, which at the most offers a polydualistic and very slim epistemology with even less of a philosophy of mind or science, with one that is much more expressive. This position is Markus Gabriel's, which also offers – in sharp opposition to Meillassoux – a pluralistic approach.

In *Fields of Sense* and *Neo-Existentialism* Markus Gabriel engages in the quest for the right correlation – or rather the quest for the best philosophical account of

⁷ I owe this point to Sergio Genovesi.

subjectivity in a mind-independent reality.⁸ Even if Gabriel does not have a problem with the idea of the interconnectedness of subjects and objects – the most harmless definition of correlationism –, he cannot want to be a full-fledged correlationist. For one thing, a correlationist has to say that there can be no universe in which subjects never appear because this would contradict the primacy of the correlation (if there are many universes at least in one universe there *need* to be subjects).⁹ This appears to be one of the central points where Gabriel strongly rejects Anton Friedrich Koch’s hermeneutical realism.

Gabriel’s ontology is built on the definition of existence as appearing in a field of sense.¹⁰ This does not mean that all fields of sense are human creations. Extremely important fields of sense are no creations of ours: nature and the universe, for instance. Thus, not all objects are constructed by human activity. But some are. As ontology has to account for *all* objects of reality, if it wants to be a realist one, Gabriel not only considers different domains of objects, but also tries to shed some light on different sets of objects which are mind-dependent. His epistemological pluralism leaves enough room for different kinds of knowledge. And he offers a conception of the subject.

Gabriel is but one example of a new ontological realists who has engaged in the philosophy of mind. He puts a strong emphasis on the question of how subjectivity is possible (its objective preconditions) and of the ways in which it engages with the things around it – in which fields of sense. Yet Gabriel and others do not want to be confused with correlationists, who have a general problem holding a realist position of any kind (partly due to Meillassoux’s problem of ancestry).

4.2. Concluding remarks

The periodic table of things is an impossible idea, and I do not want to suggest that any speculative realist or materialist argues for something like it. Certainly Meillassoux did not set out to find something like it. The *PTT* is merely an ontological construct that cannot account for any of the four question I outlined. It cannot because it is an ontology without any connection to an epistemology – or a philosophy of mind and subjectivity, or a philosophy of science, or philosophy of language, or phenomenology. But we ought to have an epistemology. And therefore we ought to have a philosophy of mind and subjectivity – and also, I would argue, at least a philosophy of science. We need this account of how we know the objective reality around us – how we as subjects are connected to the things.

⁸ Markus Gabriel, *Fields of Sense. A New Realist Ontology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 2015); *Neo-Existentialism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

⁹ Anton Friedrich Koch, “Hermeneutischer Realismus und transzendentaler Idealismus”, *this volume*.

¹⁰ Markus Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, p. 158.

Thus far, Meillassoux has not delivered a full genesis of this interconnection within his materialist ontology. I am fairly certain he wants to avoid this task because his ontology is not to be tainted with temporally situated philosophies about mind. I call them temporally situated since we are only ever able to philosophize on minds we have encountered. We are limited to human subjectivity. Meillassoux does not want his ontology to be dependent on our current natural sciences, their practices and hypotheses. The only exception he allows himself is natural science's mathematization, so that his philosophy is not rendered obsolete by any scientific revolutions.

Also, Meillassoux has not offered an epistemology which would explain how we come to know primary qualities. (So, we do not have to surrender to "Hume's problem", the re-emerged skeptic.) Due to his reluctance to leave his meta-correlationist stance, he forfeits the chance to explain the connection of (f)actual subjects with (f)actual objects. But this explanation is an essential part of the ancestral puzzle and – even more – crucial for any realist philosophy which wants to appeal to philosophers from all field, scientists and (Western and Non-Western) common sense alike.

It is important to notice the work of Anna Longo,¹¹ who in her papers "The Contigent Emergence of Thought", "The Reality of the End of the World", and "The Genesis of the Transcendental" engages in this discussion. She analyses Meillassoux's position on the contingent emergence of life and thought. Meillassoux's speculative solution seems fine if we stay in the context of ontology. Yet, according to her, it neither allows us any "engagement in reality"¹² nor offers us a better explanation of life, thought, and science than *emergence ex nihilo*. To make sense of this emergence is an open problem – in Longo's analysis of Meillassoux – which can only be tackled by philosophy, not the natural sciences. Finally, Longo attempts to naturalize contingent thought. In her model, thought becomes "one of the possible outcomes of the contingent laws of nature".¹³ Without going into the details, one can say that Longo is testing out a different path to an explanation of thought than Meillassoux's version of an emergence *ex nihilo* without abandoning his core insights of the necessity of contingency.

Even if we aim for a 'flat' ontology and resulting epistemology – as Gabriel does –, we have to explain how we can *know* mind-independent objects on a general level. We could call this form of two- or multi-sided connection a co-relation or an

¹¹ Anna Longo, "The Contigent Emergence of Thought", in Meillassoux/Longo (ed.), *Time Without Becoming* (Milan: Mimesis International, 2014), 31–50; Anna Longo, "The Reality of the End of the World", in De Sanctis/Longo (ed.), *Breaking the Spell. Contemporary Realism under Discussion* (Milan: Mimeses International, 2015), 31–48; Anna Longo, "The Genesis of the Transcendental. How to make a Realist Speculation out of Absolute Idealism", in *Method 5* (2017), 150–176.

¹² Anna Longo, "The Reality of the End of the World", p. 43.

¹³ Anna Longo, "The Genesis of the Transcendental", p. 172

interconnection to better separate terms. It will be different from a correlation in the sense that we can philosophically separate one concept from the other(s). The subjective side will not be a necessary condition for the objective side. So it is more of a mere relation than a correlation in Meillassoux's sense. The objective side (some laws – if not necessarily our laws – of nature, for instance) is necessary for subjectivity. In this way the interconnection will still entail a meaningful relation between those parts.

There are a lot of options for such interconnections. In the simplest case it is only one dyadic connection, but it could very well be triadic or a web of many dyadic connections interlinked with one another and so on. In addition to the different possible structures for the interconnection we can choose very different concepts to fill these structures. We have many of the options we recognize from correlationism, subject—object, mind—world, et cetera. Then there are options from subjectalism, like life, discourse and the like. Finally, New Realism could strive to create new concepts for its interconnections.

Against the backdrop of this thought, the interest of Gabriel and others in the philosophy of mind makes perfect sense: New and speculative realists try to escape the fate of composing an ontology that ends up as a formal ontological game. If the new realisms are unable to spell out a compelling concept of subjectivity in their respective objective ontological setups, any of their arguments would lose their punch even if the ontology itself is consistent. I would like to add, to be epistemologically on the safe – the realist – side, that a philosophy of science is also required in addition to a philosophy of mind and an epistemology. We need an account of subjectivity and of the knowledge of objective reality. I do not think we can therefore dismiss natural scientific knowledge as a method of understanding objective objects of the external world. In order to gain scientific knowledge, we need the sciences and in order to understand how their practices and theories relate to one another and how they are grounded in our epistemic situation we need a philosophy of science.

In the case of Meillassoux, I have mentioned his reluctance to propose an interconnection. His philosophy in its current state can be criticized as a formal ontological game. Hume's problem in the Meillassouxian version, the re-emerged Cartesian sceptic, the question of the stability of Nature, remains (at least partially) unresolved.

I see at least two different ways for Meillassoux and any speculative realist to address this problem. Either we argue that the ontological registers (or, in Gabriel's case, "domains of objects") allow epistemological pluralism (so Gabriel has, in fact, a number of interconnections at his disposal for different domains of objects). This way, Meillassoux would not have to give up his meta-correlationist stance but would have to become an ontological and epistemological pluralist.

Or we could try to convert a certain type of strong correlationism – say Wittgenstein's or Heidegger's – from correlation to interconnection. We could

become hermeneutic (Koch) or phenomenological realists (Lehmann). Meillassoux's speculative ontology remains unfinished, partly due to this open question. Another possibility would be to carefully combine these two options: We could argue for an epistemological pluralism, yet hold that certain kinds of objects (philosophical concepts, mathematical objects, fictional objects, cultural products, artworks, ...) and our specific subjectivity call for a certain kind of strong correlation-as-interconnection to understand them.

One of the pressing questions I see within speculative and New Realism is whether one of those three ways (or a fourth, fifth, ...) proves superior to the others. Different answers to this problem lead to very different forms of realism and philosophy.

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