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Expanding Speculative Realism & Speculative Materialism: Meillassoux, and Correlationism

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This relationship between human and Cosmos, is what Meillassoux refers as “correlationism”. Humans can only establish a correlation with the world through representational structures, but never can they access the in itself.

But if one can only experience the world from their own perspective and understand it through synthetic categories via languages, then what is reality “as such”? This is part of what a speculative realist attempts to answer. It is also here, as what pertains to this “real”, where Meillassoux intervenes the discourses of Descartes, Hume, Kant, and 20th century philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Emmanuel Levinas. Meillassoux does so by asking the question: what if human thought does not require any justification of causality as necessity?

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Kant attempts to save the necessity of causality (and thereby saving the causality of “thought” and consciousness) by justifying that it depends on the stability of phenomena as humans experiences them through their perceptions. For example, the consistent occurrence of the phenomena of sunrise and sunset reinforces the idea that there is something which causes these experiences (that the Earth spins and rotates around the Sun). For Kant, our cognitive perceptions of Nature (i.e. sunrise and sunset) not only shows us that there are stable principles which governs these experiences, they are also necessary in order for Nature to function (i.e. life on Earth; or Earth’s rotation around the sun is governed by the laws of physics, etc.).

Meillassoux intervenes this correlationist argument by saying that Kant is only concerned with human thought and its reason for the necessity of causality, i.e. it is necessary to explain the cause of sunrise and sunset because it is important for science, humanity, etc., even when there are no reasons that can explain the first principles of our perceptions of causality that we observe in Nature. This non-reason is what Kant refers as “facticity”, and what Meillassoux radicalizes into the “principle of factuality” which denotes the idea that everything is other than what it already is via the lack of reason. For Meillassoux, a physicist can understand the principles which explains our stable experiences of space-time and the laws of our Cosmos, but they cannot explain the reason for their necessity because these occurrences are purely contingent.

Meillassoux argues that correlationism has been the central notion of philosophy ever since Immanuel Kant, whose core epistemological hypothesis is twofold. On the one hand, Kant argues that objects conform to mind, rather than mind to objects.

Correlationism, by contrast, was seen to be the thesis that it is impossible to think being independent of the relation between thought and being. For the correlationist, thought always is in relation to being and being always is in its relation to thought. As such, it is both impossible and incoherent to think either of these terms independent or apart from one another. Consequently, for the correlationist, the concept of primary qualities is contradictory because it is the concept of properties independent of their correlation to thought. Where for pre-critical, realist philosophers the question was “what is the true nature of substance?”, for critical philosophers the question becomes “what is the most originary correlation?”

Correlationism, in short, is not identical to Kantianism. Kantianism is only one variant of correlationism (held probably, by almost no one today), but nonetheless holds a privileged place in having first explicitly formulated the correlationist argument.

In addition to sharing the common thesis that we can never think the terms of the correlation between thought and being independent of one another, correlationists are also united in rejecting the concept of truth as adequation. If truth can no longer be thought as adequation between an ideal entity like a proposition and an independent referent, then this is because the concept of an independent referent is, according to the correlationist, an incoherent concept.

Consequently, while we cannot know whether or not our scientific understanding of the world reflects the world as it is in-itself independent of us, we are nonetheless able to establish the universality of phenomena for all subjects structured in terms of our particular correlational structure. Likewise, under one reading of Levi-Strauss, Levi-Strauss, in his ethnographic work, is able to discern identical structures of thought at work in diverse cultures that have no contact with one another because there is a deep structure of mind organized in a particular way that replicates itself in a variety of ways in entirely different cultures, i.e., there is a universality underlying the particular.

Meillassoux begins his critique of correlationism by citing a number of dates pertaining to natural history. Our universe is 13.5 billion years old. Our earth accreted 4.56 billion years ago. Life originated on earth 3.5 billion years ago. Humanity (*homo habilis*) originated 2 million years ago. I confess that when I think of numbers like this, I grow sick to my stomach, experiencing something like Pascal's dread in the face of the infinite.

In citing these dates, Meillassoux observes that contemporary science— through techniques derived from the constant rate of disintegration of radioactive nuclei, as well as upon the laws of thermoluminescence permitting the application of dating techniques to light emitted from stars —is now capable of making statements about events anterior to the advent of life as well as consciousness (9). What is it, Meillassoux wonders, that scientists are talking about when they discuss such dates?

At this point Meillassoux introduces some terminology. Meillassoux defines as “ancestral” any event that is anterior to the emergence of the human species or life on the planet earth. Closely related to ancestral statements, Meillassoux refers to “arche-fossils” and “fossil-matter” as not simply materials indicating the traces of past life in the sense of our familiar understanding of “fossil”, but also as materials indicating the existence of ancestral realities or events anterior to all life (10). An arche-fossil is thus not an ancestral being like the big bang “in the flesh”, but is rather something like the radioactive decay of isotopes that allows us to infer the ancestral or that which precedes all life. Meillassoux's question is thus two-fold: On the one hand, he asks, under what conditions are these statements meaningful? That is, what must be the case for ancestral statements to have any sense? On the other hand, and more fundamentally, how must the correlationist interpret these statements?

Although it is still early to tell, Meillassoux's argument against correlationism in *After Finitude* has the flavor of such an argument. The first thing one notes upon opening the pages of *After Finitude* is the clarity and preciseness of his exposition, so unusual for a Continental philosopher, and the manner in which he crafts his arguments like a jeweler carving a fine gem. Regardless of whether or not Meillassoux's arguments ultimately attain the status of “singular arguments” in the history of philosophy, it is difficult not to delight in the ingeniousness of his arguments, their

athleticism, their vigor, even if one does not ultimately agree or know where these arguments will lead. Over the next few posts I would like to outline Meillassoux's critique of correlationism as it is, for me, the most convincing critique I've yet encountered.

Meillassoux opens the first chapter of *After Finitude* with an astonishing call to retrieve the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. I confess that when I first read Meillassoux's remarkable little book it almost fell from my hands upon reading this first paragraph. What could be more retrograde, I wondered, than the retrieval of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities? With this first paragraph I felt as if I was being transported back into my Introduction to Philosophy course, entertaining the epistemologies of Descartes, Locke, and Hume, all of whom struck me as irretrievably banished following Kant's Copernican revolution. The distinction between primary and secondary qualities can roughly be characterized as the distinction between relational properties and non-relational properties. As Meillassoux remarks, "[w]hen I burn myself on a candle, I spontaneously take the sensation of burning to be in my finger, not in the candle" (1). The sensation of being burnt is thus a secondary quality insofar as it only emerges in the relation between my finger and the candle and does not reside in the candle itself. All of those qualities that pertain to the sensible and, by extension, to secondary qualities are thus relational in nature. They are for-us, not in-themselves.

Speculative Realism's taking on of ecological and nonhuman/animal issues warms my intellectual heart. (Harman admits he's fully on board with the animal agenda, while Bryant cites the ecological crisis as one of the things about the contemporary landscape that older schools of philosophy are so ill equipped to deal with: "[It's] difficult to imagine something less relevant than phenomenology, hermeneutics, semiotics, or deconstructive textual analysis to the sorts of issues posed by the ecological crisis. Ecology just requires a very different set of conceptual tools.") Up to now, ecophilosophers have always been on the fringes of philosophy, carving out the sub-niche of 'environmental ethics' and struggling to develop a coherent ecophilosophy, but making progress less with questions of epistemology, ontology, or politics than with their debates over ecocentrism versus anthropocentrism versus pragmatism, deep ecology versus social ecology versus ecofeminism, and so on, in ways that never seem to get outside the eco-ghetto nearly as much as they should. (But that's a bit of an outdated characterization, too, which I hope my previous and forthcoming posts can help dispel.) How do and will "our" philosophers — the tradition of folks like Arne Naess, Val Plumwood, Murray Bookchin, J. Baird Callicott, Michael Zimmerman, Jim Cheney, John Dryzek, Andrew Light, Holmes Rolston III, Mark Sagoff, Cate Mortimer-

Sandilands, Paul Taylor, Bruce Foltz, Rosemary Radford Reuther, Bryan Norton, Mick Smith, et al. — relate to the ontological commitments of the SR crowd? The answer is: it varies, but I certainly think there's useful stuff to be taken on board from them, and I look forward to more exchange between these (somewhat) potentially convergent efforts.

The clear rejection by Speculative Realism of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and semiology, however, suggests perhaps too radical a break here with the interpretive and communicative traditions. I'm guessing this may be a temporary juncture within a broader debate, where a realist ontological position is making a stand by hinging itself in opposition to something that's been overdone (hermeneutics), but risking going too far in the opposite direction. If, as Levi's reply to Mark Crosby suggests, eco/biosemiotics, with its suggestion that the world is communicative "all the way down," is to be somehow allowed into the SR picture, then surely the embodied and interpretive dimensions that are at the heart of hermeneutic phenomenology should also be part of the frame. Or does that make things too complicated? I'm thinking, for instance, of Don Ihde's phenomenologies of technics, which do a kind of pre-Latourian network analysis of how we engage the world in and through our technological extensions. Does that fit with Harman's Heideggerian-Latourian program? I know I will have to read Harman, and promise I will do that soon.

Scu mentions "decolonial philosophy and the philosophy of radical women of color" as two currents that reshaped his relationship with "continental philosophy," and my suspicion is that these strands are, like environmental philosophy, outside the mainstream of philosophical thought and therefore a little invisible to SR. So far. But in a similar spirit I would like to express the hope that metaphysically/ontologically inclined philosophers will deal with the social world(s) — in all their post/neo/colonial, historically shaped and globally and locally uneven textures — as an integral part of the object-world of their concerns. The sheer difficulty of doing that, I think, is what keeps philosophy the noun somehow 'pure' and thus a little removed from what we non-philosophers do.

It seems to me that the major currents among the speculative realists are those of reductive materialism (Brassier), materialism (Meillassoux), object-oriented ontology (Harman, Latour, and myself), perhaps variants of vitalism (Grant?), Deleuzian thought (DeLanda, myself), and many other variants aside. The speculative realists are more united by what they oppose, than by the

philosophical claims they share in common. In short, all of the SR positions share the thesis that the human and human phenomena have no special place within being and are opposed to the thesis that we must start with an analysis of something pertaining to the human (mind, history, language, power, signs, etc.) to properly pose questions of ontology.

Obviously there are some interesting questions about how speculative realism relates to the big branches of contemporary philosophy — How does speculative realism relate to continental philosophy? How does speculative realism relate to analytic philosophy? — but what I am really curious about is how does speculative realism relate to decolonial philosophy? I probably wouldn't even think about asking about this, except a recent post by k-punk that talked about how Badiou helped awaken him from a deleuzian slumber. For me, Badiou had nothing to do with my awakening from a Deleuzian slumber (if anything he only intensified my affection for Deleuze and Guattari, the same with Zizek), but decolonial philosophy and the philosophy of radical women of color completely changed my relationship with continental philosophy. Reza obviously has serious engagement with Iranian thought, but what about speculative philosophy in general?

After *Finitude* required extensive rereading in order to convince this addled wastrel. Kant's Transcendental Idealism is limited to what the author deigns correlationism: the relationship between subject and object and as such doesn't allow matters outside this dynamic, all the while announcing the end of Absolutes and other metaphysical suppositions.

Meillassoux announces that mathematics as an underpinning of science i.e. repeatability is the longed for triumph, a lodestar on the quest for a speculative realism. There's a certain darkness in this explanation. I did appreciate despite my being an idiot that this text wasn't a polemic but rather an effort at a secular however abysmal illumination. That's me, still searching for a metanarrative.

Meillassoux ultimately wants us to find an anchor as to how to arrange understanding... the anchor he finds for us is to match whatever mathematics does, which in itself is very intriguing. I suppose math is a safer bet for legitimacy than any of the traditional absolutes to which philosophy has in the past adhered. The last pages of his book is basically an outline of a non-metaphysical but speculative absolute based off facticity should look like. I'd like to find out how this kind of

speculation works too. But I think Meillassoux goes a little too far in his search for Truth and tosses some of the baby out with the bathwater because in a way, he takes too much for granted even though in another way, he takes nothing for granted.

I don't believe that consciousness or causation or non-contradiction are necessary even if I find that the connection of the parts is what is most interesting as to what meaning is. In a way, perhaps that still makes me a correlationist in Meillassoux's book... because I don't adhere to the absoluteness as being external to our experience...that Meillassoux so wishes to determine. Yet if any axiometric is available – as Meillassoux admits – then why facticity? Why science? Certainly not the form of science! Science will not permit the asking of questions it cannot answer, because that is bad science. So he must be talking about the content science produces and in what way this kind of dia-chronicity should be found to be meaningful or not...perhaps as meaningfulness can be modifications of how we understand ourselves today, rather than as positions to be justified by where we are now, that reversal of a reversal he calls the counter-revolution of Ptolemy's revenge. It sounds good to speak by naming “where we are” in this way, but then again, I am not so sure we even yet know where we are now. In this way then, I think I don't really even show up on his radar because he takes the productivity of meaning in its mechanics to be beyond question, at least in this inquiry.

“But it is clear to what extent the fundamental decisions that underlie metaphysics invariably reappear, albeit in a caricatural form, in ideologies (what is must be), and to what extent the fundamental decisions that underlie obscurantist belief may find support in the decisions of strong correlationism (it may be that the wholly-other is). Contemporary fanaticism cannot therefore simply be attributed to the resurgence of an archaism that is violently opposed to the achievements of Western critical reason; on the contrary, it is the effect of critical rationality, and this precisely insofar as – this needs to be underlined – this rationality was effectively emancipatory; was effectively, and thankfully, successful in destroying dogmatism. It is thanks to the critical power of correlationism that dogmatism was effectively vanquished in philosophy, and it is because of correlationism that philosophy finds itself incapable of fundamentally distinguishing itself from fanaticism. The victorious critique of ideologies has been transformed into a renewed argument for blind faith.

This pernicious belief forces the advocate of correlationism to commit to the unthinkability of an objective world outside or separate from the existence of subjects – The world is held as inconceivable if not a World-for-us. To this end, Q-Man deploys some fancy logical judo wherein cosmic background radiation and the Maths proves that Principle of Sufficient Reason is bad and don't real, and the only Necessary is noncontradictory Contingency...

“Equally possible, equally probable”, “a real or physical necessity which alone(...)is capable with furnishing the reason for the obvious fixing of the outcome, it is then entirely up to me whether to call the source of this second necessity matter(...)or providence. Whatever I choose to call it – it will remain a primordial and enigmatic fact”

“In its irreducibility to all preregistered possibilities, puts an end to the vanity of a game wherein everything, even the improbable, is predictable”

“Chaos, which is the only in-itself(...)cannot be measured by any number, whether finite or infinite, and that it is precisely this super-immensity of a chaotic virtual that allows the impeccable stability of the visible world”

‘Logical binarism’ as ‘our’ means, absolute incomprehensibility as ‘vaguely comprehensible’ (idealists, not necessarily ‘real/existent’)?

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(Stated as incomplete/prolegomena for further ‘extension’), speculatively discern ‘lucidly’ ‘another absolute’...how?