

# **BEYOND FINITUDE: EXPLORATIONS IN SPECULATIVE REALISMS AND MATERIALISMS**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The publication of the English translation of Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude: An Essay in the Necessity of Contingency* in 2009 arguably marked the genesis of a new movement in continental philosophy: that of speculative realism and materialism. Meillassoux identifies himself as a materialist of the speculative variety. In *After Finitude: An Essay in the Necessity of Contingency* (*After Finitude*, henceforth), Meillassoux presents two central philosophical claims which are as follows:

- The influence of Immanuel Kant and Kantian transcendental idealism on subsequent philosophy transformed the key question of enquiry regarding ontology, from 'what is the nature of reality?' to 'what best mediates the access to reality?' Meillassoux describes this trend as correlationism, which states that 'to be is to be a given' or to be is to be a correlate. Reality-in-itself cannot be accessed, and the phenomenal realm is accessed through the mediation of *a priori* mental forms (for Kant), giving rise to other varieties of correlationist philosophy, which state variously that reality is accessed or 'constructed' by the mediation of language, consciousness or historically situated culture. Meillassoux's primary aim is to counter Kantian transcendental idealism and the later correlationist philosophies through materialism. His first philosophical intervention entails an elaboration of the arguments for the materializing of the mind and of the Kantian transcendental categories.
- Correlationism, or the idea that reality-in-itself cannot be accessed and that all knowledge is mediated by consciousness or mind or *a priori* mental categories or language, in assigning central importance to mediation challenges metaphysical concepts such as the uncaused Absolute, the principle of sufficient reason and real or causal necessity. Meillassoux argues that correlationism's challenge to metaphysics

does not consist in refuting the existence of metaphysical entities but in stating that insofar as all knowledge of reality is mediated, and since reality-in-itself cannot be accessed, it cannot be known for certain whether metaphysical absolutes which are necessary beings exist or not. Meillassoux cites the instance of Hume's problem which states that past experience by itself cannot establish the causal relation between matters of fact in the future; likewise, the existence of metaphysical entities such as a necessary Absolute can neither be empirically established nor refuted. This correlationist uncertainty regarding the status of metaphysical concepts is termed 'facticity' by Meillassoux. Further, in a materialist vein, Meillassoux aims to counter the possibility of metaphysical concepts such as causal necessity or necessary laws or necessary beings. In order to challenge and counter necessity, he posits arguments for absolutizing the correlationist uncertainty regarding the status of metaphysical entities or 'facticity', which entails stating that it is certain that necessary beings cannot exist and that uncertainty is not of knowledge (regarding metaphysical entities) but of reality or ontology. Everything extant in the physical or natural realm exists contingently.

Meillassoux is, therefore, a speculative materialist because he posits speculative solutions to the philosophical problems to which correlationism and metaphysical necessity give rise. He dwells on and draws from schools such as materialism and realism to formulate his speculative counters to these correlationist and metaphysical problems but eventually makes a sharp break from both traditional materialism and scientific realism. The aim of this dissertation is to critically examine how Meillassoux's speculative materialism as elaborated in *After Finitude* differs from materialism and realism, and consequently, what are the contradictions raised by this departure.

## II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### II.1. FIRST RESEARCH QUESTION: IS MEILLASSOUX'S MATERIALIST RESPONSE TO KANTIAN CORRELATIONISM AN ADEQUATE COUNTER?

The aim of the dissertation, as has already been stated, is to examine the two central claims of Meillassoux regarding correlationism and metaphysical necessity. In the first two chapters of *After Finitude*, Meillassoux elaborates his claim that correlationism, or the idea that reality-in-itself cannot be accessed because its knowledge is always-already mediated, emerged from Kantian transcendental idealism which posits the concept of *a priori* mental forms or categories of understanding. Meillassoux argues that Kant is a 'weak correlationist' because a) while Kant draws a distinction between reality-in-itself and reality-as-it-appears or 'reality-for-us' (the phenomenal realm) and states that the former remains beyond access because all knowledge is mediated by the Kantian categories of understanding; b) Kant also acknowledges the reality-in-itself exists, or else there will be no substance behind the appearance; and c) the only claim that can be made about the reality-in-itself is that it is non-contradictory. Meillassoux counters Kantian correlationism in two ways: firstly, he posits a new concept known as 'ancestrality', which refers to events that occurred prior to the emergence of life and thereby, consciousness, in the universe. Ancestrality refers to events that are not only distant from but 'prior to' all correlationism because they include events such as the accretion of the planet and emergence of the earliest life-forms amongst others. Meillassoux uses the term 'arche-fossil' to refer to the material evidence of ancestral events such as fossils or the rate of radioactive decay of the isotopes of the fossils. Meillassoux introduces the concepts of ancestrality and ancestral statements to refer to scientific

knowledge claims about arche-fossil in order to pose a realist question: when science makes knowledge claims about events of ancestry, or events preceding and anterior to existence of consciousness or mental categories of understanding, then are these claims true intersubjectively, mediated by correlation, or are they objectively true? In other words, Meillassoux's first counter to Kantian correlationism in positing the concepts of ancestry and arche-fossil is to formulate a realism-informed conception of time and temporal events. In stating that ancestral events refer to events which occurred prior to the existence of Being, he is drawing from the realist tradition which argues that there is a mind-independent reality and science can approximately gain knowledge of this reality. Meillassoux therefore posits a realist concept of time within which there is the unfolding of ancestral events. Secondly, within this realist time, materialist evolution took place and at a particular juncture, life and then consciousness emerged. Meillassoux's counter to Kant is thus to materialize the mind and the *a priori* concepts of understanding.

*The first research question of this thesis is to analyze: how effective is Meillassoux's materialization of the mind and of the Kantian a priori mental forms or categories of understanding against the Kantian claim that reality-in-itself is inaccessible?*

The arguments of this dissertation against Meillassoux's materialist intervention against Kantian correlationism are as follows:

- Kant categorically states in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (2004) that transcendental idealism is unlike traditional idealism since it acknowledges the existence of the reality-in-itself. His claim is that all knowledge, including knowledge of synthetic statements, is possible because all sensations are subsumed by understanding. As a result, in the Kantian schema, it is understanding which is spontaneous and senses that are passive. This implies that since all knowledge,



- including knowledge of empirically gained synthetic statements, is mediated by the *a priori* mental forms, reality-in-itself exists but cannot be known.
- Meillassoux himself acknowledges that Kant states that reality-in-itself exists even though it is inaccessible. Meillassoux describes Kant – owing to his acknowledgement of the existence of reality-in-itself – as a ‘weak correlationist’.
  - Given these two observations, this thesis argues that Meillassoux’s attempt to counter the Kantian claim by positing a materialization of the mind and of the mental categories remains largely ineffective because it cannot explain the differences between phenomenal experience and the underlying material processes. Kant himself acknowledges the existence of material reality-in-itself; his argument is that it is inaccessible. Meillassoux’s response, consisting of materialization of the mind and of mental categories, is an arguably ineffectual intervention because materialism itself acknowledges that there are no ready answers to explain the differences of phenomenal experiences and their underlying electro-chemical/materialist, cerebral processes; the former however cannot be reduced to the latter.
  - Materialist philosophy attempts to theorize the brain-mind relationship by examining the various reductionist and emergentist arguments made against and in favour of reductionism. In order to grapple with the first research question articulated above – that is, how effectively does Meillassoux’s materialization of the Kantian categories of understanding counter the correlationist claim that reality-in-itself cannot be accessed – this thesis examines the various arguments made within materialist philosophy in favour of and against reductionist tendencies which deny the existence of abstract, transcendent entities such as the soul, mind, free-will etc. and conflate the mind to the brain, the mental to the cerebral.

- Having revealed the limitations of Meillassoux's materialist response to Kantian correlationism, the thesis argues that scientific realism provides a stronger counter to the Kantian claim that reality-in-itself remains inaccessible. In *Critique of Pure Reason* (2007), Kant observes that science (and mathematics) itself is possible because of mediation of the mental forms of understanding; he defines scientific objectivity as those relations established by the mental categories which can be universalized. If all knowledge is possible because of the mediation of pure and universal mental categories, then how does new, paradigm-shifting scientific knowledge emerge? Scientific realism grants referential status to scientific terms and states that science has approximate access to the mind-independent reality. If scientific terms did not have approximate access to reality, then 'scientific progress' can only be understood as the result of a sheer 'miracle' or coincidence. Part of the first research question, therefore, is to examine the feasibility of a scientific realist counter – and Meillassoux does explore realism in his conceptions of ancestrality and arche-fossil – to Kantian correlationism, in place of Meillassoux's materialization of the mind and of the categories of understanding.

The first research question is articulated and explored in Chapters I, II and III of this dissertation.

## **II.2. SECOND RESEARCH QUESTION: HOW EFFECTIVE IS MEILLASSOUX'S COUNTER TO METAPHYSICAL CONCEPTS OF PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON AND CAUSAL NECESSITY, IN THE FORM OF 'ABSOLUTISING' OF FACTICITY?**

The chapters 3,4 and 5 of *After Finitude* contain exegeses of the question as to what becomes of metaphysical absolutes such as necessary causality, absolute Being, and the principle of sufficient reason following correlationism. According to Meillassoux, the correlationist position is 'agnostic' because unlike metaphysics which *positively asserts* the existence of necessary causality and necessary beings such as God, and unlike materialism which *categorically negates* the existence of abstract, transcendental, and therefore, non-material entities, correlationism states that given the mediated nature of all knowledge, it cannot be known for certain whether abstract entities such as necessary laws, necessary beings, or necessary causality exist or not. This epistemic uncertainty associated with correlationism is what Meillassoux terms 'facticity': it cannot be known for certain whether metaphysical entities exist or not. Meillassoux's philosophical intervention entails 'absolutising' of the facticity: the uncertainty of knowledge is replaced by an ontological contingency, implying that when epistemic uncertainty is 'absolutised', it gives rise to ontological contingency which states that everything extant exists contingently. There are no necessary beings nor uncaused Absolutes. The absolutising of facticity (epistemic uncertainty associated with correlationism) gives rise to the 'principle of factuality' which states that by the virtue of being contingent, everything that exists can persist eternally or may perish. Meillassoux states that the principle of factuality – brought about by the absolutising of facticity – gives rise to 'hyper-chaos' wherein everything extant exists contingently, and therefore, there are no ultimate reasons for their persistence or their destruction; either can happen contingently.

*The second research question is: how feasible is Meillassoux's attempt to establish ontological contingency and to refute metaphysical necessity, through 'absolutising' of facticity and the assertion of the principle of factuality?*



Meillassoux articulates two sets of related but discrete arguments to explain why he proceeds to establish ontological contingency and to refute metaphysical necessity through the 'absolutising' of (the correlationist epistemic) facticity. They are as follows:

- David Hume observes in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (2007) that knowledge of 'matters of fact' consists of establishing cause-effect relations between them. For instance, the sound of a voice uttering cogent statements in the darkness leads to the conclusion that there is a human being speaking even if she is not visible due to the darkness. Thus, relations between matters of fact are established through cause-effect relationship, the knowledge of which is gained through experience. According to Hume, experience consists only of observation of contiguity between the two matters of fact, and nothing more. In other words, the causal comprises only of the observable in the Humean framework. Insofar as necessary causality is not observable, Hume neither accepts nor denies the existence of necessary beings but states that reason cannot establish the existence or non-existence of the necessary. This is 'Hume's problem'.
- Hume further states that just as experience cannot guarantee cause-effect relations between matters of fact in future, neither can imagination. Hume states that from experience one can be certain that a loaf of bread provided nourishment in the past but experience provides no guarantee that a loaf of bread can and will nourish in future as well. Experience can be juxtaposed with imagination, which he observes can think of thousands of possible outcomes of a given cause. When a billiard ball hits another one on the table, imagination can conjure many different kinds of motions which the first ball can impart to the second. However, the instability of imagination is not matched by the stability of observable experience. Thus, for Hume neither experience nor imagination can guarantee persistence of the cause-effect relation between matters of

fact in future. All synthetic knowledge for Hume is, therefore, probabilistic knowledge.

- Now, when Meillassoux 'absolutises' facticity (or uncertainty of knowledge regarding whether metaphysical entities exist or not), he asks what hinders the possibilities which the Humean imagination can conjure up, from becoming real in the state of hyper-chaos?
- While Meillassoux's first argument is that the concept of contingency which becomes real in the state of hyper-chaos, once facticity is absolutised, is based on realization of the Humean imaginary hypothesis, his second argument is that his concept of contingency described in the principle of factiality, by the virtue of being based on the Humean imaginary hypothesis, is unlike the concept of contingency in traditional materialism. He argues that materialist conception of contingency is at the most, a probabilistic conception of contingency, which allows for contingent events and entities to occur but within the deterministic confines of laws of nature. Here he makes two arguments: firstly, that the Humean imaginary hypothesis allows a more radical conception of contingency than materialism, and secondly, in materialism, the laws of nature are not conceived of as contingent.

Meillassoux thus counters the arguments of metaphysics in favour of the existence of necessary causality, the principle of sufficient reason and necessary being by absolutizing facticity, which leads to ontological contingency. He bases his concept of ontological contingency on the Humean imaginary hypothesis. One of the research objectives of this dissertation is to point out a) that Meillassoux's argument for basing his concept of contingency on the Humean imaginary hypothesis is both anti-materialist and a return of 'finitude', since he makes his concept of contingency beholden and subservient to a subjective mental category like the imagination which Hume himself does not consider a

source of reliable knowledge. *The thesis asks if the materialist conception of nature and emergence of natural entities and laws from motion intrinsic to matter does not unleash the possibility of a far more radical conception of contingency. Secondly, the thesis points out how Meillassoux's characterization of the materialist conception of laws of nature as not being contingent is a misinterpretation;* drawing from the works of materialist philosophers such as David M. Armstrong, the dissertation points out that contrary to Meillassoux's understanding, the materialist conception of laws of nature is of contingency and the thesis delineates the arguments which materialism makes against necessary causality and the principle of sufficient reason, and in favour of contingency of natural laws.

The second research question is dealt with directly in Chapter IV of this dissertation, and the questions are explored partly in Chapter I and Chapter II.

### III. OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

The dissertation begins with an Introduction, which gives an overview of the arguments made in the four chapters. What follows is the summary of each chapter of the thesis.

Chapter I explores how materialism has historically attracted the charge of reductionisms of various kinds; it has also been accused of dismissing certain philosophical concepts such as mind, soul, or freewill, thereby leaving for philosophy the position of 'handmaiden' of the natural sciences. How can materialism retain its monist ontology while avoiding reductionisms at the same time is a question which has been one of the primary concerns of the defenders of materialism. The aim of this work is two-fold: the first aim is to examine the works of David Armstrong, Richard Boyd and Charles Wolfe in order to argue that the mind-brain identity theory can be upheld without resorting to reductionism of the mental to the

cerebral; and the second aim is to formulate a materialist concept of the organism, which retains its distinction from mechanistic reductionism while at the same time not attributing its difference from the machine to any metaphysical concepts such as Holism, Vitalism, or soul. The biologist Richard Lewontin claims that the metaphor of the machine which is often used for 'organisms' is inadequate, and even erroneous, because it does not take into account 'the multiple causal pathways' which constitute the organism. This chapter attempts to combine the idea of multiple causality with the materialist rebuttals to accusations of reductionisms by its critics.

Chapter II examines how the idea that there is a 'verification-transcendent' reality which exists 'independent of observation' associated with scientific realism invokes the criticism that it is a metaphysical theory. Scientific realism tries to avoid the tag of being a metaphysical doctrine by its epistemological argument which states that science is the only effective way of gaining objective knowledge. Scientific realism, however, continues to attract the criticism of being a theory immersed in the quagmire of metaphysics because unlike logical empiricism and constructivism, it does not view theoretical terms as mere instruments of experimental predictions; scientific realism grants referential status to theoretical terms with 'epistemic access', and views scientific theories as corresponding to physical phenomena and entities, and as thereby being source of objective – approximate and not absolute – knowledge of the physical realm. By granting referential status to theoretical terms, scientific realism is accused of ontologising the unobservables, which can neither be verified nor falsified by existing scientific methodologies. Against this charge, scientific realism posits the idea of a dialectical relation between theoretical terms, referring to the unobservables and scientific methods. The second argument made by realism in favour of granting referential status to scientific terms, and to the idea that the relation between scientific theories and external reality is one of approximation, is articulated in the 'no



miracle' thesis. Both these arguments made in defense of scientific realism by Richard N. Boyd itself stand challenged by the so-called orthodox interpretation of quantum mechanics. The aim of the chapter is to examine the possibilities and relevance of the two arguments of scientific realism in countering the idea that the existence of quantum states in the microphysical world renders realism obsolete. It also explores the arguments made by 'agential realism' theory in order to find out if the orthodox quantum theory can be reconciled to scientific realism.

The discussions in chapters I and II on the key ideas of materialism and scientific realism will facilitate the examination of Quentin Meillassoux's materialist and scientific realist hypothesis, which he posits against Kantian correlationism and metaphysical necessity, discussed in chapters III and IV of this thesis.

The term 'correlationism' coined by Quentin Meillassoux is an umbrella term for the varied anti-realist schools of thought which deny that there is an 'autonomous' external world that exists independently of, and is not constituted by, the stand-point of the observer; and that 'objective' knowledge of this external world is possible. According to Meillassoux, correlationism consists of the claim that it is impossible to distinguish between the subjective and the objective since both emanate from inter-subjectivity. Therefore, the need of acknowledging the existence of an autonomous, mind-independent material realm which can be the basis of objective knowledge dwindles and schools of thought such as materialism and scientific realism justly incur the accusation of being metaphysical. Meillassoux argues that it is the 'finitude' of human epistemology immanent in the Kantian conception of 'categories of understanding' that gave rise to correlationisms of various kinds, even though Kant himself is a 'weak correlationist'. The aim of chapter III is two-fold: first, it aims to closely examine the claim of Meillassoux about the Kantian origins of correlationism; and second, it endeavours to

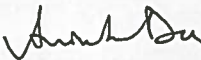


critically engage with Meillassoux's materialist rebuttal to Kant's concept of categories as *a priori*.

In *After Finitude*, Quentin Meillassoux posits the concept of 'principle of factuality' in order to establish the contingency of the natural order and of the natural laws which govern the realm of nature. The principle of factuality states – in the materialist vein – that there are no real necessities or law of sufficient reason; there are also no necessary entities. Contingency of entities and natural laws are the only necessity. He establishes the necessity of contingency of absolutising 'facticity', or the correlationist argument that whether laws of nature are necessary or contingent cannot be known given that the realm of nature as an 'in-itself' remains inaccessible and the mediation of correlation insurmountable. Meillassoux, having asserted the necessity of contingency of natural entities and laws, tries to grapple with the perennially relevant question of metaphysics: if natural laws and the natural realm are contingent, then what explains regularities observable in the realm? The philosophical arguments which Meillassoux employs 1. to establish the contingency of the natural order; and 2. to explain observable regularities in the natural order despite the contingency of the natural laws entails a representation of materialism's notion of contingency as chance occurrences within the stability of natural laws. The aim of chapter IV is to point out the inconsistencies in Meillassoux's formulation of the materialist concept of contingency and to argue that while Meillassoux attempts to draw his concept of radical contingency or principle of factuality governing the natural order from Humean scepticism, the contingency of natural laws and of the natural order can be derived from materialism itself.

The four chapters of this dissertation explore answers to the two research questions formulated above and thereby critique Meillassoux's conceptualization of the limitations of Kantian correlationism as well as his conception of contingency in the speculative materialist tradition.

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