

Meillassoux on correlationism and ancestrality

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1. Background

First of all I would like to thank COIN for the invitation to give a short talk and to participate in today's discussion. Let me start with some background. In 2010 I completed my master thesis in philosophy, to which I later-on added an addendum. In these documents I develop a theory of knowledge in response to Kant's famous critique of metaphysics. It forms the first part of a project that consists in total of three parts. The aim of this theory of knowledge was to restore metaphysics after Kant. Yet, in it I had to confront not only Kant's critique and the dogmatic positivism it inaugurated, but also radical skepticism and postmodern relativism. In establishing my theory of knowledge, I obtained the epistemic freedom to engage in metaphysics in the post-Kantian era, to defend objective claims about what's beyond the empirical.

In the second part of my project, I developed various metaphysical arguments for the existence of an ultimate origin of the world. Arguing for the existence of such an origin was crucial for the third part of my project. For in this final part I develop an account of the sublime as a spontaneous experience of the ultimate ground of reality.

Thus my project culminates in an aesthetics, passes by a metaphysics and originates in a theory of knowledge. Back then I thought that my theory, although alluded to by many post-critical philosophers, had been never explicitly formulated. I couldn't even find a catchy name for it. Almost as a crime against philosophy I gave my theory of knowledge an utterly dull name. I called it the *alternative theory of knowledge*.

Later on I came across a book from the unknown philosopher Quentin Meillassoux. When I red the first chapter I was completely shocked. Here was someone of whom I had never heard, from a tradition of philosophy that is not really mine, who had nevertheless identified and described the very same position that I had developed and argued for in my thesis. And in fact, he not only formulated it, he even tried to refute

it. Moreover, he found a very catchy name for it. He called it *correlationism*. Or more precisely: strong correlationism (but I shall keep referring to it as correlationism).

In what follows I briefly sketch the position he has coined correlationism and I have named so dully the alternative theory of knowledge. I take the freedom to start from the way I have described it in my thesis. Then I turn to Meillassoux' articulation of it.

2. Towards the meta-epistemic stance

In my master thesis I make a distinction between *the-world-for-us* and *the-world-in-itself*. *The-world-for-us* is the world as implied by the human point of view. It is the world as it is thought and perceived by us humans. *The-world-in-itself* is the world as it exists on and for itself in an absolute sense. It is the absolute.

Now, *the-world-in-itself* is inaccessible for us. It is impossible for us to get outside ourselves in order to compare the world as it is ‘in itself’ to the world as it is ‘for us’. We do not have access to such an absolute stance since we cannot have knowledge of anything independent of our *human way* of thinking and perceiving. We are trapped in our human condition. We can only access the world from our human viewpoint. In other words, we cannot think or perceive something while abstracting from the fact that it is still *us* who are thinking or perceiving it. Indeed, if we think or perceive anything as true about the *in-itself*, then what we think or perceive is still a human thought or human experience. All our knowledge is inescapably *qualified* as human knowledge. And we can’t get rid of this qualification. Absolute knowledge is thus unreachable. So *the-world-in-itself* is unknowable because our knowledge is always *relative* to our human conditions of knowledge.

Is this Kantianism? No, for contrary to Kantianism, even the claim that there are things outside us grounding our experience, can only be justified as a claim about *the-world-for-us*. So, Kant’s dictum that there are *Dinge-an-sich* is only warranted *within* *the-world-for-us*. Even the very distinction between *the-world-for-us* and *the-world-in-itself* is only justified as a claim about how the world is *for us*. For again, *everything* we think applies to *the-world-for-us*. Thus, contrary to Kant, *the-world-for-us* is the ultimate unsurpassable horizon of *all* our thought. It is *for us* the holistic all-inclusive. We are always already *in* it. It is the subject of *all* our predication.

Is it idealism? No. Idealism claims to know the in-itself. According to idealism the in-itself is consciousness or mind and nothing exists outside it. But this claim is not warranted because we cannot know the in-itself. Is it than realism? No, for again we know nothing at all about the in-itself; and therefore also not whether realism is true.

Now, let us draw a map. According to *realism* there are minds and mind-independent objects. Minds can know these objects. *Kantianism* also has it that there are minds and mind-independent objects. But these minds cannot know these objects. *Idealism* asserts that there are only minds. Objects are mind-dependent constructions and known to be such. According to what we might call the *epistemic stance* there surely are minds. But we cannot get outside our minds. So we do not know whether there are mind-independent objects. And if there are objects outside us, we do not know whether they are similar to what is grasped by our minds, or in fact quite different.

On this map correlationism is yet another position. We can refer to it as the *meta-epistemic stance*. According to correlationism or the meta-epistemic stance, even the distinction between "mind" and "mind-independent object", between the "inside" and the "outside", is merely justified as a human-relative distinction. This distinction between "mind" and "mind-independent object" or between "inside" and "outside" might not apply to the-world-in-itself. Due to the inaccessibility of the world-in-itself we will never know. For everything we say can only be justified as a claim about the world-for-us. As said, even the very distinction between the-world-for-us and the-world-in-itself is only justified within the world-for-us from which we cannot escape.

3. Metaphysics after Kant

Should this all worry us? Not at all. Contrary to Meillassoux I fully embrace the meta-epistemic stance. I fully embrace correlationism. In fact, I believe that it is precisely correlationism that enables us to do metaphysics after Kant. Let me explain why.

Within the world-for-us we can justify many, many claims. Examples include, but are not limited to, logical propositions such as the principle of non-contradiction, mathematical statements such as the theorems of set theory, ordinary claims (such as that I exist, or that Brigitte exists instead of being merely a product of my thought; that the glass of water in front of me exists extra-mentally as well, that Paris is the capital of France, etc.) and moral claims, such as that it is wrong to torture for fun.

In fact, the whole project of metaphysics can be carried out *within* the-world-for-us, as long as we realize that all our metaphysical claims, similar to any other claim, are about the *world-for-us* and can never be justified as claims about the *in-itself*.

And this is sufficient. For what else could we *as human beings* wish for than to justify claims about how the world is *for-us*? Indeed, what else could we as human beings wish for than to be justified as human beings? After all, *we are human beings*, not gods. The *in-itself* is inaccessible. That is what we should concede to the radical skeptic. But we can still find truth: objective universal human truth within the-world-for-us. And *for us humans*, that should be sufficient.

4. Meillassoux introducing correlationism

Instead of the pair of notions *the-world-for-us* and *the-world-in-itself* Meillassoux takes *correlation* as the crucial concept, that is, the correlation between thought and being. As he writes ‘we only have ever access to the correlation between thinking and being. [...] All that we can ever apprehend are correlates. [...] But correlationism [...] does not hypostatize the correlation; rather, it invokes the correlation to curb every hypostatization [...] of an object of knowledge which would turn the latter into a being existing in and of itself. [...]. In other words, as he has it: ‘We cannot get out of our own skins. [We] are [always and already] situated in the mids of the correlation’.

He articulates the point of correlationism very clearly when he writes: ‘Consider [this] scientific statement: “Event Y occurred x number of years before the emergence of humans”. [...] The correlationist will in no way intervene in the content of this statement: she will not contest the claim [...]. No – she will simply add [to this statement] – something like a simple codicil, always the same one, which she will [...] append to the end of the phrase: ‘Event Y occurred x number of years before the emergence of humans – *for humans*. This codicil is the codicil of modernity.’

5. The ancestral challenge

In his first chapter Meillassoux also presents an argument against correlationism. He calls it the argument from ancestrality. It is not entirely clear how strong he takes this argument to be, whether it is merely a challenge for correlationism or already a direct attempt to refute it. Neither is it entirely clear how the argument is supposed to work

precisely. He is certainly not merely saying that science is right and correlationism is wrong. I shall provide my rendering of his argument. It is inspired by what he writes.

Science tells us that there was a time before our existence. The correlationist accepts this as a claim about how the world is for us. Therefore, the proposition [There was a time at we did not exist] is only justified as a claim about the-world-for-us. Now, our existence is obviously a necessary condition for there being a world-for-us. Since also this insight is only ‘for us’, the proposition [Our existence is a necessary condition for there being a world-for-us] is only justified as a claim about the-world-for-us.

But then it follows by substitution that the proposition [There was a time at which the world-for-us did not exist] is also justified as a claim about the-world-for-us. Now, there are two options. Either (i) the-world-for-us is a necessary condition for the existence of time or (ii) time is absolute.

Suppose that (i) the-world-for-us is a necessary condition for the existence of time. In that case the proposition [There was a time at which a necessary condition for the existence of time did not exist] is justified as a claim about the-world-for-us. But this proposition is a *contradiction* and thus not justified as claim about the-world-for-us.

So correlationists must reject option (i). It follows that (ii) time is absolute. Time belongs to the-in-itself. Thus the correlationist circle is broken and correlationism fails. A correlationist may respond that the claim that time is absolute is only justified as a *human, all to human* claim, that is, the proposition [Time is part of the world-in-itself] is only justified as a claim about the-world-for-us. So the circle is not broken.

But this doesn’t help the correlationist. For she also accepts that the proposition [We cannot know anything about the-world-in-itself] is justified for-us, which contradicts the claim that the proposition [Time is part of the world-in-itself] is justified for-us.

Although the argument from ancestrality is not available *in this way* in Meillassoux’ first chapter, I believe it is in fact the most charitable and strongest interpretation of his appeal to ancestrality as a challenge for correlationism. It shows why Meillassoux focuses in his first chapter on time instead of space in his attack of correlationism.

6. Suggested refutations

The correlationist can, I think, refute the argument. Take the claim that our existence is a necessary condition for the-world-for-us to be there. Let us call this claim C. Is C indeed justified as a claim *for us*? I don't think so. Precisely because we don't know anything about the-world-in-itself, it might - for all we know - be in fact the case that the-world-for-us *is* the-world-in-itself. That is to say, precisely because we do not know anything about the 'in itself' of the-world-for-us, we cannot rule out the bare possibility that realism is true. Now, *if* the-world-for-us *is* in fact the same as the-world-in-itself, *then* our existence is not a necessary condition for the-world-for-us to be there. For, clearly, our existence is not a necessary condition for the-world-in-itself to be there. But then claim C is not justified *for us* and the ancestral argument fails.

Moreover, the dichotomy between (i) and (ii) might be a false dilemma. For even if the-world-for-us is not a necessary condition for the existence of time, it does not follow that time belongs to the *in-itself*. After all, it might also be the case that (iii) it is *necessarily true* of the-world-in-itself that there is no time without consciousness and that there is a conscious non-human being who's subjective world contains time. Since we cannot rule out this possibility, a refutation of (i) does not entail (ii). Hence, refuting option (i) does not bring us knowledge of the *in-itself* and the correlationist circle remains intact. I propose to further assess the argument from ancestrality and my suggested refutations of it during today's discussion. Thank you.