

SPECULATIVE REALISTS QUESTION REALITY BEFORE HOMO SAPIENS AND AFTER EXTINCTION

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ABSTRACT

The term ‘speculative realism’ was first introduced in 2007 to describe the work of certain philosophers around Q. Meillassoux, of which many translations, introductions, and special issues have been published in Japanese. According to speculative realists, phenomenology, structuralism, analytic philosophy, and most subsequent schools of twentieth-century philosophy (L. Wittgenstein, M. Heidegger, and M. Foucault) assume the antirealist, Kantian claim that phenomena depend upon the mind to exist. That is, the speculative realists are united by their rejection of what Meillassoux calls correlationism. This is the doctrine according to which we never grasp an object in itself, in isolation from its relation to the subject.

Now, when we call ancestral any reality anterior to the emergence of the human species, we can ask, how is correlationism liable to interpret these ancestral statements? We can also ask, how has matter emerged from a vacuum? How have living systems appeared out of lifeless matter? How has Homo sapiens come into existence out of living systems?

Meillassoux himself asks how to pass through the correlationist circle. We should question the absolute, which is outside correlation. Our absolute, in effect, is nothing other than an extreme form of chaos. The world before human beings emerged is thereby contingent. There is a capacity-to-be-other, that is, there is the possibility of our own non-being.

The posteriority of extinction should also be considered, in addition to ancestral anteriority. R. Brassier, one of the speculative realists, refers to the death of the sun. He has said that ‘the death of the sun is nothing but a death of mind’. How does thought think the death of thinking?

Important is the dialogue of the correlationism of modern philosophy with old and new realism, which question the reality outside of the correlation.

We have already emerged in this universe with mind. Although we can recognise something with this mind, something, in other words, is nothing but something which is recognised by our mind. Thus, correlationism is correct and cannot be escaped. From within correlation, however, we can recognise that there is an outside to the correlation. We can recognise ancestral anteriority and posteriority of extinction through the correlation. We can think the reality through the working of negation of recognition. We can recognise Kantian thing-in-itself through the self-negation of recognition.

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Again, we have already emerged in this universe with mind. What has already existed should be thought as necessary. Now, I can propose an ex post facto teleology. The fact is constituted by this after, by the belatedness of the subject. I also would like to propose a modest anthropocentrism. The emergence of human beings should be thought as necessary, while all things and living things potentially have minds. Thus, we can call this view a weak panpsychism. Furthermore, once we have minds with which to think, we think everything with these minds. The ability to think has something privileged.

Nonetheless, at the same time, it is important to think everything as contingent. There is no reason for anything to be or to remain the way it is; everything must be able to be other than it is. We not might have emerged through a process of evolution. We might not exist in this universe. We could be extinct in the future.

Keywords: speculative realism, Meillassoux, correlationism, ancestral, extinction

1.

The term ‘speculative realism’ was first introduced in 2007 to describe the work of four philosophers: Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier, and Iain Hamilton Grant, after Meillassoux published his book, *After Finitude - An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* - in 2006. Many translations, introductions, and special issues on speculative realism have been published in Japanese.

Steven Shaviro has classified these four philosophers in his book, *The Universe of Things on Speculative Realism*. I will refer to his clear explanations here, with which I will summarise Meillassoux’s thought.

According to Meillassoux and Shaviro, phenomenology, structuralism, analytic philosophy, and most subsequent schools of twentieth-century philosophy (Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, and Michel Foucault) assume one version or another of the antirealist, Kantian claim that phenomena depend upon the mind to exist. It is this assumption, above all, that speculative realism seeks to overturn (note1).

More precisely, the speculative realists are united by their rejection of what Meillassoux calls correlationism. This is the doctrine according to which we never grasp an object-in-itself, in isolation from its relation to the subject. For correlationism, a mind-independent reality cannot exist, because the very fact that we are thinking of such a reality means that it is not mind-independent after all. From this point of view, ‘thought

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cannot get outside itself in order to compare the world as it is “in itself” to the world as it is “for us”, and thereby distinguish what is a function of our relation to the world from what belongs to the world alone’ (Meillassoux, p.3).

By correlation, Meillassoux means the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other. We will henceforth call correlationism any current of thought which maintains the unpassable character of the correlation so defined. Consequently, it becomes possible to say that every philosophy which disavows naïve realism has become a variant of correlationism (note2).

Thus, one could say that, up until Kant, one of the principal problems of philosophy was to think substance while, ever since Kant, it has consisted in trying to think the correlation.

Prior to the advent of transcendentalism, one of the questions that divided rival philosophers most decisively was who grasps the true nature of substance. Who thinks the idea, the individual, the atom, God? But ever since Kant, what divides rival philosophers is no longer to ask who has grasped the true nature of substantiality, but rather to ask who has grasped the more original correlation (ibid., p.5f.).

Philosophers, however, cannot ask how the mind has developed through the history of evolution. They cannot ask the being before we, Homo sapiens, acquired the ability to think. For it could be, as Meillassoux says, that ‘contemporary philosophers have lost the great outdoors, the absolute outside of pre-critical thinkers: that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not’ (ibid., p.7).

Then Meillassoux asks what happened at the date of origin of the universe 13.5 billion years ago; at the date of the accretion of the earth 4.56 billion years ago; at the date of origin of life on earth 3.5 billion years ago; at the date of the origin of humankind, Homo habilis, 2 million years ago.

He calls ancestral any reality anterior to the emergence of the human species or even anterior to every recognised form of life on earth. How, then, is correlationism liable to interpret these ancestral statements? All we have to do is to ask the correlationist the following question: what is it that happened at the ancestral age? This would explain what Meillassoux insists (ibid., p.9f.).

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There is much difference between the four speculative realists. Furthermore, some have proposed a view called neo-realism. Shaviro is one such thinkers, whose book I mentioned above. He proposes a reality outside of the correlation, that is, the reality of matter independent of thinking. His realist point of view is influenced by Alfred North Whitehead's panpsychism.

Panpsychism is the thesis that even rocks have minds. More formally, panpsychism is defined as the view that all things have mind or mind-like quality. Mind is seen as fundamental to the nature of existence and being. Panpsychism is the view that basic physical constituents of the universe have mental properties, whether or not they are parts of living organisms. Panpsychism, in fact, has a long philosophical pedigree. From the pre-Socratics, on through Spinoza and Leibniz, and down to William James and Whitehead, panpsychism is a recurring underground motif in the history of Western thought. Thus, we think matter not as inert and passive but immanently active, productive, and formative.

According to Shaviro, Whitehead and the speculative realists alike question the anthropocentrism that has so long been a key assumption of modern Western rationality. For Whitehead, human perception and cognition have no special or privileged status. No single being, not the human subject, and not even God can claim priority over any other (note3).

Systems philosophers, such as Ervin Laszlo, have challenged these questions. His book aims at 'an introduction to the informed universe, cornerstone of a scientific theory that will grow into a genuine theory of everything. It describes the origins and the essential elements of this theory and explores why and how it is surfacing in quantum physics and in cosmology, in the biological sciences, and in the new field of consciousness research' (Laszlo, p.3). Such philosophers question the reality outside the correlation. They ask, how has matter emerged from a vacuum? How have living systems appeared out of lifeless matter? How has Homo sapiens come into existence out of living systems?

Laszlo proposes evolutionary panpsychism. For him, panpsychism is the philosophical position that claims that all of reality has a mental aspect: psyche is a universal presence in the world. 'Qualifying "panpsychism" with "evolutionary" means that we do not claim that psyche is present throughout reality in the same way, at the same level of development. We say that psyche evolves, the same as matter. But we affirm that both matter and mind – physis and psyche – were present from the beginning: they are both fundamental aspects of reality' (ibid., p.147). All of their proposals are common in that there is a reality outside the correlation.

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But have these challenges passed through the test of correlationism? How do they address Kantian claims? Is there epistemology (theory of recognition) in systems philosophy?

Speculative realists place importance on the dialogue between adherents of realism (speculative realists, panpsychists, and evolutionary panpsychists) and correlationists.

3.

Meillassoux asks more. The ancestral statement is true, in that it is objective, but one whose referent cannot possibly have actually existed in the way that this truth describes it. It is a true statement, but what it describes as real is an impossible event; it is an objective statement, but it has no conceivable object. Or to put it more simply: it is a non-sense (ibid., p.16f.).

Thus, the retrojection which the correlationist is obliged to impose upon the ancestral statement amounts to a veritable counter-sense with respect to the latter. A consistent correlationist should, then, stop compromising with science.

In other words, the consistent correlationist should stop being modest and dare to assert openly that she is in a position to provide the scientist with an a priori demonstration that the latter's ancestral statements are illusory: for the correlationist knows that what they describe can never have taken place the way it is described.

Thus, Meillassoux says that 'it is important to get out of ourselves, to grasp the in-itself, to know what is whether we are or not' (ibid., p.27).

Now, Meillassoux claims that Kantian transcendentalism could be identified with a weak correlationism. The reason is that critical philosophy does not prohibit all relation between thought and the absolute. It precludes any knowledge of the thing-in-itself (any application of the categories to the supersensible), but maintains the thinkability of the in-itself (ibid., p.35).

Then, we go on to a strong correlationism, which would consist in upholding the thesis that rejects Kant's absolute propositions, viz., that there is a thing-in-itself beyond our representations. It is this strong model of de-absolutisation that we must confront, since this is the model that prohibits most decisively the possibility of thinking what there is when there is no thought. It is based upon two decisions of thought.

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The first decision is that of all correlationism - the thesis of the essential inseparability of the act of thinking from its content.

The second metaphysical strategy consists in absolutising the correlation itself. Its basic line of argument may be summarised as follows: the Kantian notion of the thing-in-itself was not only unknowable, but also unthinkable. If so, however, then it seems that the wisest course is simply to abolish any such notion of the in-itself. Accordingly, it will be maintained that the notion of the in-itself is devoid of truth because it is unthinkable, and that it should be abolished so that only the relation between subject and object remains, or some other correlation deemed to be more fundamental.

The strong model in this characterization seems to us to be represented as much by Wittgenstein as by Heidegger, which is to say, by the two representatives emblematic of the two principal currents of twentieth-century philosophy: analytic philosophy and phenomenology (ibid., p.35ff.).

We can think the facticity of 'there is'; it is a facticity which can certainly be thought, but thought solely on account of our inability to gain access to the absolute ground of what is. I cannot think the unthinkable, but I can think that it is not impossible for the impossible to be. Facticity is supposed to express thought's inability to uncover the reason why what is, is.

Then, we can think as follows. Instead of construing the absence of reason inherent in everything as a limit that thought encounters in its search for the ultimate reason, we must understand that this absence of reason is, and can only be, the ultimate property of the entity. We must convert facticity into the real property whereby everything and every world is without reason and is thereby capable of actually becoming otherwise without reason. We must grasp how the ultimate absence of reason, which we will refer to as unreason, is an absolute ontological property, and not the mark of the finitude of our knowledge. Following are Meillassoux's famous statements: 'The truth is that there is no reason for anything to be or to remain thus and so rather than otherwise, and this applies as much to the laws that govern the world as to the things of the world. Everything could actually collapse; from trees to stars, from stars to laws, from physical laws to logical laws; and this not by virtue of some superior law whereby everything is destined to perish, but by virtue of the absence of any superior law capable of preserving anything, no matter what, from perishing' (ibid., P.53).

On account of this fact of the absence of reason, we are able to think – by dint of the absence of any reason for our being – a capacity-to-be-other capable of abolishing us, or of

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radically transforming us. But if so, then this capacity-to-be-other cannot be conceived as a correlate of our thinking, precisely because it harbours the possibility of our own non-being.

We do not maintain that a determinate entity exists, but that it is absolutely necessary that every entity might not exist. This is indeed a speculative thesis, since we are thinking an absolute, but it is not metaphysical, since we are not thinking any thing or any entity that would be absolute (note4). The absolute is the absolute impossibility of a necessary being.

There is no reason for anything to be or to remain the way that it is; everything must, without reason, be able not to be or be able to be other than it is.

Contingency is such that anything might happen, even nothing at all, so that what is remains as it is.

We can now claim to have passed through the correlationist circle – or at least to have broken through the wall erected by the latter, which separated thought from the great outdoors, the eternal in-itself, whose being is indifferent to whether or not it is thought.

Meillassoux writes that, ‘Our absolute, in effect, is nothing other than an extreme form of chaos, a hyper-Chaos, for which nothing is or would seem to be, impossible, not even the unthinkable’. First, contingency is necessary and hence eternal; second, that contingency alone is necessary. But from this absolute necessity of contingency alone we can infer an impossibility that is every bit as absolute – for there is in fact something that this primary atom of knowledge ensures us is absolutely impossible, even for all powerful chaos, and this something, which chaos will never be able to produce, is a necessary entity. ‘Everything is possible, anything can happen – except something that is necessary, because it is the contingency of the entity that is necessary, not the entity’ (ibid., p.63ff.).

4.

R. Brassier is one of the four speculative realists and the translator of Meillassoux’s book, from French into English. He refers to the death of the sun in his book, *Nihil Unbound - Enlightenment and Extinction* -. He says that the death of the sun is nothing but a death of mind. How does thought think a world without thought? How does thought think the death of thinking?

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Extinction is not to be understood here as the termination of a biological species, but rather as that which levels the transcendence ascribed to the human, whether it be that of consciousness or Dasein, stripping the latter of its privilege as the locus of correlation. Thus, if the extinction of the sun is catastrophic, this is because it disarticulates the correlation.

Again, the death of the sun is a death of mind, because it is the death of death as the life of the mind.

According to Brassier, the premise of ancestry alone does not suffice to disqualify the pretensions of correlationism, since the alleged incommensurability between ancestral and anthropomorphic time continues to assume a chronological framework which can be appropriated by correlationism. Thus, ancestral anteriority can too easily be converted into anteriority for us. By way of contrast, the posteriority of extinction indexes a physical annihilation which no amount of chronological tinkering can transform into a correlate for us. After the sun's death, there will be no thought left to know that its death took place.

Thus, it is not so much that extinction will terminate the correlation, but that it has already retroactively terminated it (Brassier, p.223ff.).

Brassier is influenced by Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche's nihilism. From the original emergence of organic sentience to the ultimate extinction of human sapience, nothing will have happened. Becoming aims at nothing and achieves nothing. That is Nietzsche's nihilism. But is Nietzsche's entire philosophy dedicated to overcoming this nihilistic view? We say 'yes' to this human being's destiny. Indeed, we are fragile beings. We have no privilege to exist in this universe. Nevertheless, we are celebrated to exist here. We, human sapience, only have the ability to communicate with each other and think mutually within society.

Eugene Thacker argues as follows, referring to Brassier: being neither empirical nor experiential, extinction can only be thought, even in its own negation. Extinction signifies the horizon of thought because there is a philosophical decision that makes it possible for philosophy to think even the thought of extinction. Speculative annihilation – thought negating itself in its thinking – is a kind of blind spot for philosophy (Thacker, p.147f.).

Thought can think the death of thinking. That is, it is through the negation of itself that the mind can think the death of the mind. In other words, philosophy can think extinction by the negation of philosophy itself.

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5.

Important is the dialogue between the correlationism of modern philosophy and old and new realism, which question the reality of the ancestral.

We have already emerged in this universe with mind. Although we can recognise something with this mind, something, in other words, is nothing but something which is recognised by our mind. Thus, correlationism is correct and cannot be escaped. From within correlation, however, we can recognise that there is an outside to the correlation. We can recognise ancestral anteriority and posteriority of extinction through the correlation. Mind can think the reality outside the correlation through the working of negation of recognition (note5).

Again, we have already emerged in this universe with mind. What has already existed should be thought as necessary. Now I can propose ex post facto teleology. Our conceptual abilities to refer to something determinate in the world can only take place after the fact. The fact is constituted by this after, by the belatedness of the subject. I also would like to propose the modest anthropocentrism, which has two meanings. One is that the emergence of human being should be thought as necessary, and the things and living things have minds potentially. Thus we can call it weak panpsychism. Another meaning is that once we have minds to think, we think everything with these minds. The ability of thinking has something privileged. We are necessarily within the cycle of correlation.

But everything should be contingent. There is no reason for anything to be or to remain the way it is; everything must be able to be other than it is. We might have not emerged through the process of evolution. We might not exist in this universe. We could extinct in the future.

Notes

1. Meillassoux picks up Wittgenstein and Heidegger as typical modern philosophers as described below. Maurizio Ferraris refers to Foukant (Foucault + Kant) as postmodernism thinkers (Ferraris).

2. Meillassoux has the most concern with the correlationism among the speculative and neo- realists.

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3. For Harman, who is one of four philosophers above mentioned, in contrast, all objects are ontologically equal because they are all equally withdrawn from one another (Harman). Grant, who is also one of four philosophers, and Markus Gabriel, who is one of neo-realists, propose the reality of objects outside the correlation (Gabriel).
4. Meillassoux said that we call speculative every type of thinking that claims to be able to access some form of absolute (Meillassoux, p.34).
5. We might say that we could recognize Kantian thing-in-itself.

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