

Ancestrality 1:

Before...

The arch-fossil enjoins us to *track* thought by inviting us to discover the “hidden passage” trodden by the latter in order to achieve what modern philosophy has been telling us for the past two centuries is impossibility itself: *to get out of ourselves*, to grasp the in-itself, to know what is whether we are or not.¹

How then is thought to carve out a path towards the outside for itself? [...] Everything could actually collapse...²

Before Humanity is concerned with the desire “to get out of ourselves, to grasp the in-itself, to know what is whether we are or not”, as Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (English translation 2008) envisages. The impact of Meillassoux’s argument on “ancestrality” lies precisely in its promise “to carve out a path towards the outside for [thought]”. What has been stopping thought from doing so – and thus to find out whether “everything could actually collapse” – is (Kantian) “correlationism”, which Meillassoux characterises thus:

[N]othing sensible – whether it be an affective or perceptual quality – can exist in the way it is given to me in the thing by itself, when it is not related to me or to any other living creature. When one thinks about this thing “in itself”, i.e. independently of its relation to me, it seems that none of these qualities can subsist. Remove the observer, and the world becomes devoid of these sonorous, visual, olfactory, etc., qualities, just as the flame becomes devoid of pain once the finger is removed.³

It is the idea that nothing “exists” outside a relation to a (human) observer that which Meillassoux castigates as “correlationsim”. Any qualities a “thing” might have do not make sense without such a (cor)relation to a “me” or subject. And this “subjectivism” creates a major problem for the understanding between the humanities and the (exact) sciences since:

On the one hand, we acknowledge that the sensible only exists as a subject’s relation to the world; but on the other hand, we maintain that the mathematizable properties of the object are exempt from the constraint of such a relation, and that they are effectively in the object in the way in which I conceive them, whether I am in relation with this object or not.⁴

As a result, Kant’s “thing-in-itself” which had to be excluded in the form of “transcendence” from critique makes a powerful return (if one ignores that for much of modern science this “anthropocentric” perspective probably has been untenable since Galileo) – at least in philosophy – in the guise of so-called “object-oriented-ontology”, “speculative realism” and also to some extent in

¹ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier, London: Continuum, 2009, p. 27.

² Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, pp. 51, 53.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1. See also: “By ‘correlationism’ we mean 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” (p. 5). We here aren’t concerned with the inconsistency and inaccuracy of Meillassoux’s critique of Kant (for a powerful refutation see for example David Golumbia, “‘Correlationism’: The Dogma that Never Was”, *Boundary 2* 43.2 (2016): 1-25). Instead, our focus is on Meillassoux’s “speculative” thought experiment of the “arche-fossil” and reality “outside” the human.

⁴ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p.3.

a variety of “new materialisms”.⁵ One of the problems of such a move for philosophy, however, is that it looks necessarily “pre-critical” and thus threatens to be perceived as a “regression” (e.g. a return to “dogmatic metaphysics”).

We are not intending to engage with this part of Meillassoux’s argument, however, since we believe that the “necessary paradox” that underlies correlationism has maybe received too much attention. Instead, for the purpose of our own argument regarding the possibility and the necessity of a notion of “before humanity”, we are interested in Meillassoux’ claim that the paradox of correlationism – the necessity of an “outside” that cannot be experienced “as such” – is due to some form of “bereavement”:

If contemporary philosophers insist so adamantly that thought is entirely oriented towards the outside, this could be because of their failure to come to terms with a bereavement – the denial of a loss concomitant with the abandonment of dogmatism. For it could be 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; that outside which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory – of being entirely elsewhere.⁶

The “great outdoors” is of course in some ways a synonym of “before humanity” (not only in a temporal sense, but in the sense of *outside* humanity – a phrase that in the time of posthumanism and the “nonhuman turn” is gaining in urgency today). It is also necessarily a question that paleoanthropology is closely concerned with in the sense of searching for what could be called a “non-correlationist” way of explaining how we became human. Or, in other words, can evolution really escape the “prisonhouse” of anthropomorphism, representation and reverse teleology, or, can there really be a post-anthropocentric evolution (in the sense of: humans seeing themselves as the endpoint of evolution)?⁷ To put it even more simply – would evolution make sense “without” us, and if so, why should “we” be interested in it?

⁵ See for example Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014; and Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

⁶ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 7.

⁷ Despite its best efforts the theory of (biological) evolution remains dogged by the problem of ancestry, which manifests itself in the ongoing search for a “common ancestor” of (or the “missing link” between) humans and nonhuman primates. Richard Dawkins’s *The Ancestor’s Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Life*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005) makes clear that it is impossible to escape “reverse teleology” (i.e. “doing history backwards”), in the sense that every evolutionary perspective necessarily starts from the fact that we are here today and works its way back to some origin (which necessarily always remains deferred and continues to recede): “It is hard to deny our human temptation to see this one species [i.e. the human] as ‘on the main line’ of evolution, the others as supporting cast, walk-on parts, sidelined cameos. Without succumbing to that error, there is one way to indulge a legitimate human-centrism while respecting historical propriety. That way is to do our history backwards...” (p. 12). Dawkins, somewhat disingenuously, nevertheless “chooses” this procedure because the alternative, according to him would be worse: “Evolutionary history can be represented as one damn species after another” (p. 8). It is worth noting as well that Dawkins is aware of the paradoxical nature of the preposition “before”, however, he isn’t prepared to look any deeper into the problem: “The chimpanzees and bonobo pilgrims will already have joined forces with each other ‘before’ we greet them. And here we have a little linguistic trickiness which I must face at the outset, before it dogs us any further. I placed ‘before’ in inverted commas because it could confuse. I used it to mean before in the backwards sense – ‘before, in the course of the pilgrimage to the past’. But that of course means *after* in the chronological sense, the exact opposite! ... I shall adopt the convention of ‘before’ in inverted commas. When you see ‘before’, remember that it really means after! When you see before, it really means before. And the

Meillassoux seems to be slightly envious of science's capability regarding access to what he refers to as the "arche-fossil". Science is able to make truthful statements about a time "before humanity", even before life as such – deep geological time is becoming less and less "mysterious" (for "us"). So Meillassoux is, rightly, intrigued: "what is it exactly that astrophysicists, geologists, or palaeontologists are talking about when they discuss the age of the universe, the date of the accretion of the earth, the date of the appearance of pre-human species, or the date of the emergence of humanity itself?"⁸. All these are concerned with things that are "anterior to every form of human relation to the world".⁹ This anteriority is referred to by Meillassoux as "ancestral" ("any reality anterior to the emergence of the human species"), while "arche-fossil" refers to "materials indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event; one that is anterior to terrestrial life".¹⁰ For correlationist philosophy these questions remain "illegitimate" since they originate in a literally "unwitnessable" scenario. A time "before humanity" is literally "unthinkable", unless it was a time that was already "announcing" the human, or a "pre-human" or a "proto-human" – in the sense that prehistory (or ancestry, as Meillassoux calls it) was "always already" a kind of "proto-history" ("a retrojection of the past on the basis of the present").¹¹

A truly *ancestral* understanding of *before humanity* would involve an entirely other relationship – one that, precisely, comes *before* (human) existence and thought. The problem that Meillassoux formulates in the form of a challenge for (correlationist) philosophy (since it is probably impossible to think of a non-correlationist philosophy – unless one were happy to give up the kind of thinking that is understood as "philosophical") – lies in thinking an ontology that is "anterior to givenness itself":

ancestral reality does not refer to occurrences which a lacunary givenness cannot apprehend, but to occurrences which are not contemporaneous with any givenness, whether lacunary or not. Therein lies its singularity and its crucial potency with regard to correlationism... *how to conceive of a time in which the given as such passes from non-being into being?*... For the problem of the arche-fossil is not the empirical problem of birth of living organisms, but the

same for 'after' and after, *mutatis mutandis*" (pp. 13-14). It is this linguistic "trickiness", however, which allows Dawkins to reconstruct the ancestry of human evolution as a (reverse) "pilgrimage" in the first place, and it is this feature that *Before Humanity* decides to investigate and problematise. Meillassoux articulates the same impatience with what we would term "reverse teleology" in the idea of the "precursor" (or the "proto" and "prefiguration" more generally, see Ivan Callus, "Drop the 'Proto-': Posthumanism and Prefiguration", *Word & Text* 6 (2016): 167-172):

You think that a precursor is someone who comes before those who follow after? Well, you're wrong: the precursor is not the one who comes before, but rather the one whom the successors subsequently claim came before... This is the peculiar knowledge to which philosophers lay claim, a knowledge that sometimes seems to amount to little more than these rigmoroles wherein time is turned upside down, the better to contrive a countersensical redoubling of the time of science. A peculiar knowledge indeed, which renders us incapable of grasping precisely that which is actually most gripping about the temporality of science – the fact that science does indeed think that *what comes before comes before, and that what came before us came before us*. For it is precisely the power thought and none other that constitutes the formidable *paradox of manifestation* uncovered by science, which philosophy should have been endeavouring to think during these past two centuries: how is empirical knowledge of a world anterior to all experience possible? (Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 123)

Before Humanity is the attempt to take seriously and think both temporalities that this "paradox of manifestation" involves.

⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 16.

ontological problem of coming into being of givenness as such... at issue here is not the time of consciousness but the time of science...¹²

The challenge for thinking *ancestrality* is thus “to understand how science can think a world wherein spatio-temporal givenness itself came into being within a time and a space which preceded every variety of givenness”.¹³ It is a thinking “outside” the point-of-view of the (Kantian) transcendental subject – a thinking that is *both* “speculative” and “realist”.¹⁴

Meillassoux’ programme is therefore – “[i]n order to preserve the meaning of ancestral statements without regressing to dogmatism” – to “*uncover an absolute necessity that does not reinstate any form of absolutely necessary entity*”. To this end, “we must think an absolute necessity without thinking anything that *is* absolutely necessary”.¹⁵ This rather paradoxical necessity without necessity is thus Meillassoux’s ground for “speculation”. Interestingly, as Meillassoux admits, his thoughts are prompted not so much (or at least not only) by an ancestral *before* but rather by the prospect of an *after* (or, to be more precise, by the lack thereof): “transcendental subjects, coordinated between themselves but unfolding and ‘floating’ in the midst of an absolute nothingness into which everything could dissolve once more were the human species to disappear”.¹⁶ Before and after would thus, again, be conjoined in some “world without us”,¹⁷ which would only be thinkable through a “materialism of matter” – “which takes seriously the possibility that there is nothing living or willing in the inorganic realm”.¹⁸ For Meillassoux, this necessity is – as the subtitle to *After Finitude* already reveals – the necessity of “contingency”: “*it is necessary that there be something rather than nothing because it is necessarily contingent that there is something rather than something else*. The necessity of the contingency of the entity imposes the necessary existence of the contingent entity”.¹⁹ It is thus the “facticity” (e.g. of the ancestral) that stands against the absolute of “reason” in correlationism, which leads Meillassoux to his main “stratagem”:

So long as we believe that there must be a reason why what is, is the way it is, we will continue to fuel superstition, which is to say, the belief that there is an ineffable reason underlying all things. Since we will never be able to discover or understand such a reason, all we can do is believe in it, or aspire to believe in it. So long as we construe our access to facticity in terms of thought’s discovery of its own intrinsic limits and of its inability to uncover the ultimate reason for things, our abolition of metaphysics will only have served to resuscitate religiosity in all its forms, including the most menacing ones. So long as we construe facticity as a limit for thought, we will abandon whatever lies beyond this limit to the rule of piety. Thus, in order to interrupt this see-sawing between metaphysics and fideism, we must transform our perspective on unreason, stop construing it as the form of our deficient grasp of the world and turn it into the veridical content of this world as such – we must project unreason into things

¹² Ibid., pp. 20-21.

¹³ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁴ “The virtue of transcendentalism does not lie in rendering realism illusory, but in rendering it astonishing, i.e. apparently unthinkable, yet true, and hence eminently problematic” (Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 27).

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 34,

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 35-36.

¹⁷ In posthuman times, “the world without us” scenarios have become somewhat of a topos. See for example Alan Weisman’s *The World Without Us*, New York: St Martin’s Press, 2007. Weisman’s ecological intent in showing a world “outside” of humans (and their impact) is not without some (rather problematic) nostalgic humanism: “Is it possible that, instead of heaving a huge biological sigh of relief, the world without us would miss us?” (p. 5).

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁹ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 76.

themselves, and discover in our grasp of facticity the veritable *intellectual intuition* of the absolute.²⁰

Hence the necessarily speculative and realist approach of the thought experiment of ancestry – let’s take the idea of before humanity *seriously*. How to do justice doing justice to this thing, event, state...? What “absolute” lies behind its intellectual intuition? What “facticity” transcends the limits of thinking before humanity?

It is certainly no coincidence (given the janus-faced nature of the “before”) that this facticity becomes particularly relevant in the current climate of posthumanist “postanthropocentrism”, extinction threats and species angst. Meillassoux himself admits as much when he says: “Closer inspection reveals that the problem of the arche-fossil is not confined to ancestral statements. For it concerns every discourse whose meaning includes *temporal discrepancy* between thinking and being – thus, not only statements about events occurring prior to the emergence of humans, but also statements about possible events that are *ulterior* to the extinction of the human species”.²¹ It is precisely this temporal discrepancy – which Meillassoux goes on to term “dia-chronicity”²² – that has only become meaningful through the “hiatus between being and terrestrial thought” introduced by “*the very inception of modern science*”.²³ It is this dia-chronicity that, as we would argue, is doubly inscribed within the phrase “before humanity”. And we would agree with Meillassoux that an engagement with the questions raised by this dia-chronicity only makes sense through new (i.e. “posthumanist”) forms of cooperation between the humanities (e.g. philosophy, literature) and the sciences (paleontology, biology etc.), since: “It was science that made it meaningful to disagree about what there might have been when we did not exist and what there might be when we no longer exist – just as it is science that provides us with the means to rationally favour one hypothesis over another concerning the nature of a world without us”.²⁴ “Before humanity” refers to this thing called “a-world-without-us” and the limits it makes thinkable or: what is before us (i.e. behind *and* ahead).

²⁰ Ibid., p. 82.

²¹ Ibid., p. 112.

²² By which he means “all such statements about events that are anterior or ulterior to every terrestrial-relation-to-the-world” (p. 112)

²³ Ibid., p. 113.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 114.