

In Defense of Correlationism

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“Language may be a distorting mirror, but it is the only mirror we have”¹

Abstract

In his influential first book *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* Quentin Meillassoux strives to regain access to how the world is *in itself* rather than how it is experienced and thought *by us*. His opponents are post-Kantian philosophers, who maintain that what we call ‘reality’ appears inescapably as the correlate of our language or thought. These philosophers discard any attempt to access the ‘in itself’ as pre-critical and even naive. But Meillassoux’s project is not pre-critical. He aims to access the ‘in itself’ again by showing that post-Kantian *correlationism*, the idea that we can only access the correlation between thinking and being, and never being itself, is contradictory. For that he provides three original arguments, the argument from *ancestrality*, the argument from *facticity* and the argument from *mathematization*. The ancestral argument aims to show that correlationism fails because it cannot render scientific statements about a cosmos anterior to human existence meaningful. I argue that his argument is based on a false dilemma and thus not convincing. The argument from facticity purports to establish that correlationism is incoherent since it is still committed to absolute possibilities. I argue that this argument doesn’t succeed either because it is based on a confusion between epistemic and ontological possibilities. Meillassoux’s argument from mathematization aims to conclude that correlationism is untenable because modern science reveals to us a mathematically describable reality wholly indifferent to our existence. I argue that, to the contrary, the almost perfect mathematization of nature can actually be cashed out as an argument for correlationism. His arguments therefore do not go through. Meillassoux did not break the correlationist circle. Correlationism stands unrefuted by Meillassoux.

1. Introduction

In his influential first book *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* Quentin Meillassoux strives to regain access to the absolute, that is, to how the world is *in itself* rather than how it is experienced and thought *by us*.² His opponent thus is post-Kantian critical

philosophy, which is premised on the thesis that what we call ‘reality’ appears inescapably as the correlate of our language or thought. Post-critical Kantians subordinate our knowledge of the “great outdoors” to our epistemic relation with it. Since it is impossible for us to step outside our human cognitive capacities, we will never be able to access reality as it is independently from us. So, we will never be able to know anything about the nature of the absolute. Philosophers within the post-critical phenomenological and existential tradition hence turned away from absolute reality. They focused on language, consciousness or some other suggested realm of the ‘for us’ and not on how being is independently from us. For them any post-critical attempt to regain access to the ‘in itself’ is discarded as pre-critical and even naive.

Yet, Meillassoux is not returning to a pre-critical stance. He purports to think reality in itself again, but without going back to pre-critical thought. His aim is to show that post-Kantian *correlationism*, the idea that we have only access to the correlation or interplay between thinking and being, and never to being itself, is contradictory. For that he provides three new arguments in his book. The argument from *ancestrality* purports to show that correlationism is untenable because it cannot render scientific statements about a world anterior to our relation to the world meaningful. His argument from *facticity* aims to establish that correlationism is incoherent, since it remains committed to absolute possibilities. Meillassoux’s argument from *mathematization* intends to conclude that correlationism must be rejected because modern science has revealed a mathematically describable physical world that is totally independent of human existence. In this paper I present and analyze these three arguments, and argue they all fail. Thus, despite Meillassoux’s original attempt to break the post-Kantian correlationist circle, he did not regain access to the absolute. We remain in the ‘for us’.

The structure of my paper is as follows. In the next section I outline in more detail the position Meillassoux wants to overcome, namely correlationism. In section 3 I shall present Meillassoux’s argument from ancestrality against correlationism. In section 4 I argue that this argument is based on a false dilemma and thus not convincing. In section 5 I describe his argument from facticity. I argue that this argument does not succeed either due to a confusion between epistemic and ontological possibilities. In section 6 I discuss his third argument against correlationism, namely the argument from the almost perfect mathematization of the world. I argue that, contrary to Meillassoux, the exhaustive mathematization of reality can in fact be cashed out as an argument for correlationism. Section 7 concludes the paper.

2. Correlationism

In his book Meillassoux provides a detailed account of the post-Kantian position that he wants to reject. He has coined the view *correlationism*. Its central concept is the *correlation*, that is to say, the correlation between thought and being. According to correlationism “we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.”³ Its main thesis is that human experience and thought cannot get outside itself in order to compare the world as it is ‘in itself’ to the world as it is ‘for us’. We simply cannot establish which aspects of reality are independent from our cognitive faculties and which are a function of our cognitive relation to the world. All we humans can ever apprehend are correlates. We are always and already situated “in the midst of the correlation.”⁴

Correlationism departs from the epistemic primacy of the correlation, that is to say, of the relation between thought and world, over the related terms. Says Meillassoux:

“The ‘co-’ (of co-givenness, of co-relation, of the co-originary, of co-presence, etc.) is the grammatical particle that dominates modern philosophy, its veritable ‘chemical formula’. 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. ... To ask who has grasped the more originary correlation: is it the thinker of the subject-object correlation, the noetico-noematic correlation, or the language-referent correlation? The question is no longer ‘which is the proper substrate?’ but ‘which is the proper correlate?’ During the twentieth century, the two principal ‘media’ of the correlation were consciousness and language, the former bearing phenomenology, the latter the various currents of analytic philosophy.”⁵

The correlation of thought and being is thus not necessarily the same as the relation between subject and object. Many post-Kantians hold that the correlation is of a more original, fundamental or inclusive nature. The inescapable epistemic togetherness of thinking and being is akin to a wide range of post-critical positions within continental and analytical philosophy, including, say, Heidegger’s *Dasein* and *Ereignis* as the co-propriation of man and being and Carnap’s dismissal of cognitive external questions.

Further, as Meillassoux points out,

“correlationism is not a metaphysics: it does not hypostatize the correlation; rather, it invokes the correlation to curb every hypostatization, every substantialization of an

object of knowledge which would turn the latter into a being existing in and of itself. To say that we cannot extricate ourselves from the horizon of correlation is not to say that the correlation could exist by itself, independently of its incarnation in individuals.”⁶

He articulates the point of correlationism very aptly 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.”⁷

Thus, precisely because we cannot get beyond or step out of our human condition, everything we say, experience or think is always already relative to us. This prior ‘for us’ is inescapable. The absolute “great outdoors” of pre-critical philosophy is inaccessible. We will never reach out to reality as it is not relative to us, as it exists in itself regardless of thought.

Before I continue a remark is appropriate. When I read Meillassoux’s book in which he presents correlationism I was astonished. Here was suddenly someone of whom I had never heard, from a tradition of philosophy that is not really mine, but who had nevertheless before me identified and described the very same position that I had developed and argued for in my master thesis.⁸ And in fact, he not only formulated it, he even tried to refute it. Moreover, he found this catchy name *correlationism* for it. Still, I think that the concept of correlation is not adequate to sketch the position. For it still seems to assume too much. If access to the ‘in itself’ is impossible for us, then we cannot know either that we are trapped in a *correlation between* our thought and being. For on correlationism, for all we know, consciousness might be all there is. It might be true in an absolute sense that only mind exists. In that case it would not be appropriate to speak of a *co*-relation. There would be a sort of mental *monism* instead of a *correlation* between thinking and being. Since the correlationist cannot rule out such an absolute idealism, the term ‘correlation’ assumes in fact too much.

In what follows I further flesh out the position that Meillassoux so creatively coined *correlationism* and I have named so dully ‘the alternative theory of knowledge’ in my master thesis. Given my above remark on the notion of correlation I take the freedom to describe the

position as I did independently from Meillassoux in my master thesis. However, what I say about it accords with Meillassoux's characterization of correlationism.

The constitutive distinction of correlationism is the 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 thought and perceived by us humans. The-world-in-itself is the world as it exists in 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 cannot get rid of this qualification. Thus a "view from nowhere" is for us unreachable. Absolute knowledge is therefore unobtainable. The-world-in-itself is unknowable precisely because our knowledge is always inevitably *relative* to our human conditions of knowledge.

Is this then Kantianism or transcendental idealism? No, for contrary to Kantianism or transcendental idealism, even the claim that there are things outside us grounding our experience, can only be justified as a statement about the-world-for-us. So, Kant's dictum that there are *Dinge-an-sich* or objects that ground our human experiences is only warranted *within* the-world-for-us. Kant took his famous distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal world as an absolute. But contrary to Kantianism, we do not know whether this distinction is absolutely true. On correlationism it is nothing more than a claim about the-world-for-us and not about the-world-in-itself. Indeed, Kant's dictum is a distinction *within* the-world-for-us. Moreover, even the very distinction between the-world-for-us and the-world-in-itself is ultimately only justified as a claim about how the world is *for us*. For again, really *everything* we think and say applies to the-world-for-us. Contrary to transcendental idealism, the-world-for-us is the ultimate unsurpassable horizon of *all* our human experience *and thought*. It is *for us* the holistic all-inclusive. We are always already *in* it. The-world-for-us is the subject of *all* our predications, even those about the-world-for-us itself.

Is it then metaphysical or speculative idealism? No. Metaphysical or speculative idealism claims to know the in-itself. On metaphysical or speculative 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 then 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* or *transcendental idealism* also has it that there are minds and mind-independent objects. But these minds cannot know these objects. Further, *metaphysical* or *speculative idealism* asserts that there are only minds. Objects are mind-dependent constructions and known to be such. According to yet another position, let's call it the *epistemic stance*, there 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 quite different.

On this map correlationism is yet another position. On *correlationism* or the *meta-epistemic stance* the distinctions between 'mind' and 'mind-independent object', between 'the inside' and 'the outside', between 'subject' and 'object', between 'experience' and 'things grounding experience' are also only justified as a human-relative distinction. Distinctions such as those between 'mind' and 'mind-independent' object, between 'inside' and 'outside' or between 'subject' and 'object', might not apply to the-world-in-itself. Due to the inescapable 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 merely justified within the world-for-us from which we simply cannot escape.

Now, should this all worry metaphysicians? Not at all. Contrary to Meillassoux I do accept 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 modus ponens, non-contradiction and bivalence, 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 extramentally 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 and remains 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.

3. The ancestral challenge

In his first chapter Meillassoux presents his first argument against correlationism. He calls it the argument from ancestrality. In what follows I shall describe the argument as he presents it. After that I shall provide my rendering of the argument, inspired by what he writes. I will then argue that the argument, although ingenious, fails.

He starts his outline of the argument with the observation that contemporary science has established beyond reasonable doubt that the cosmos is older than the advent of human life. There have been many events anterior to the coming into being of human beings, such as the origin of the universe itself (13.8 billion years ago), the accretion of the earth (4.6 billion years ago) and the extinction of the dinosaurs (66 million years ago). Meillassoux calls events that took place before the advent of human life ancestral. Now, anyone who takes science seriously must accept that ancestral events took place. This is undeniable. Time, space and matter clearly did exist before there were human beings. The history of the cosmos is much older than that of human life. Meillassoux then asks the following question:

“How are we to grasp the *meaning* of scientific statements bearing explicitly upon a manifestation of the world that is posited as anterior to the emergence of thought and even of life – *posited, that is, as anterior to every form of human relation to the world?* Or, to put it more precisely: how are we to think the meaning of a discourse which construes the relation to the world – that of thinking and/or living – as a fact inscribed in a temporality within which this relation is just one event among others, inscribed in an order of succession in which it is merely a stage, rather than an origin?”⁹

So, given that the ancestral statements of contemporary science are indisputable, how is correlationism able to accept these statements? Ancestral claims clearly impose no problem for metaphysical realism. For the realist it is no surprise at all that the world we experience existed a long time before we came into being. After all, he or she takes it that the world we experience is the world as it exists in itself independently from us. But scientific ancestral statements do seem to pose a problem for the correlationist. Or so Meillassoux thinks. Here is why. If science tells us that the correlate emerged *in the* world, how can correlationists then maintain that it is the *givenness* of the world?

The only option for the correlationist seems to be to interpret ancestral statements in a specific way. Yes, the universe originated 13.8 billion years ago, before the advent of human beings. But this claim is justified only as a claim about how the world is *for us*. It doesn't say anything about the world in itself. And yes, science teaches that the earth came into being 4.6 billion years ago. Yet again, this undeniable fact is only a fact *for us*. Whether it is true of the world *in itself* remains unknown for us. Here we see how correlationists invoke the 'codicil of modernity' to move from a common 'face-value' realist meaning of ancestral statements to the more originary correlationist meaning.

The reason for this movement is that on correlationism the face-value realist meaning of ancestral statements cannot be the ultimate meaning. For that would entail that we have gained access to a being that is not co-extensive with our relation to it, that is to say, a being anterior to the correlate. But such access is impossible on correlationism.

Yet, as Meillassoux argues, this strategy of shifting towards an alleged deeper or more fundamental meaning by invoking the 'for us' codicil does not help the correlationist. The correlationist can speak only of what is given to us, but then the emergence of the correlation of thought and being *within* the cosmos is *unthinkable*. As he writes:

“An ancestral statement only has sense if its literal sense is also its ultimate sense. If one divides the senses of the statement, if one invents for it a deeper sense conforming to the correlation but contrary to its realist sense, then far from deepening its sense, one has simply cancelled it. This is what we shall express in terms of the ancestral statement's *irremediable* realism: either this statement has a realist sense, and only a realist sense, or it has no sense at all.”¹⁰

Thus correlationists cannot reconcile the indisputable ancestral statements of science with correlationism. So the position fails. It is not entirely clear how strong Meillassoux takes this argument to be, whether it is merely a challenge for correlationism or already a rigorous attempt to refute it. It is also not 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 formal rendering of Meillassoux's argument. It is inspired by what he writes. But given my earlier remarks about the concept of correlation, I shall cast the argument in terms of the pair I used in my master thesis, i.e. world-for-us and world-in-itself.

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 which we did not exist] is only justified as a claim about the-world-for-us. Now, our existence is a necessary condition for there being the-world-for-us. Since also this insight is only 'for us', the proposition [Our existence is a necessary condition for there being the-world-for-us] is again only justified as a claim about the-world-for-us.

Both propositions logically entail [There was a time at which the-world-for-us did not exist]. Since logical laws are justified as claims about the-world-for-us it follows that the proposition [There was a time at which the-world-for-us did not exist] is justified as a claim about the-world-for-us as well. There are now 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 have to reject (i). But then it follows that (ii) time is absolute. Time belongs to the in-itself. 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 statement

that [Time is part of the-world-in-itself] is justified for-us. There is no escape for the correlationist. Correlationism is contradictory and must be rejected.

Although the argument from ancestrality is not available *in this way* in Meillassoux's first chapter, I believe it is in fact the most charitable and strongest interpretation of his appeal to ancestrality as a challenge for correlationism.

4. The ancestral argument refuted

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. 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 the case that the-world-for-us *is* human-independent reality. That is, precisely because we do not know anything about the *in itself* of the-world-for-us, we cannot rule out the possibility that realism is true. But obviously, *if* the-world-for-us *is* in fact the same as human-independent reality, 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 human-independent reality to be there. But then C is not justified *for us* and the ancestral argument fails.

Besides, 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, that is to say, (i) is false, it doesn't follow that time belongs to the in-itself, that is, (ii) is true. After all, it might also for example be true of the world-in-itself that (iii) there is no time without consciousness and that there is a conscious non-human being whose subjective world contains time. Since we cannot rule out this possibility – nor other similar or wholly different possibilities – the negation of (i) doesn't entail (ii). Hence, a refutation of (i) does not result into knowledge of the in-itself. The correlationist circle remains intact.

The proponent of the ancestral argument might object that in the above response the term 'the-world-for-us' is taken *de re* instead of *de dicto*. Surely, she might say, on a *de re* reading of the-world-for-us our existence might not be a necessary condition for there being the-world-for-us. For all we know, realism might be true and in that case the-world-for-us taken *de re* is simply human *independent* reality. For the ancestral argument to go through we must opt for a *de dicto* reading of 'the-world-for-us'. That is, we must focus on the-world-for-us *qua world-for-us*. Without human beings there is no *manifestation* of a 'for us'. Without us

there is no *givenness of being*. It is in *this* sense that human beings are a necessary condition for the existence of the-world-for-us. But then, as the proponent may hold, the ancestral argument is successful after all.

Yet, by focusing on the-world-for-us in this specific manner, the proponent of the ancestral argument seems to be hypostatizing the world-for-us. And that is something a correlationist cannot accept. On correlationism, we cannot substantiate the-world-for-us because we cannot affirm anything about the *in itself* of the-world-for-us. For doing so would entail that we are affirming something about absolute reality, which according to correlationism is epistemically unjustified. So correlationists can rebut this response by pointing out that we shouldn't engage in reflections of the nature of the-world-for-us. The-world-for-us *in itself* is for human beings terra incognita. This response resembles a correlationist rejoinder that Meillassoux himself presents in his book in order to refute it, namely that of conflating 'object-level' and 'meta-level'. He expresses this correlationist's rejoinder as follows:

“Your objection ... evinces an elementary confusion between the empirical and the transcendental level These two levels of thought – the empirical and the transcendental – are like the two faces of a flat sheet of paper: they are absolutely inseparable but they never intersect. But your mistake consists precisely in allowing them to intersect – you have turned a structure which should have remained flat into a Möbius strip.”¹¹

The point is that talking *about* the *in itself* of the-world-for-us comes down to hypostatizing it and thus treating it as an object amongst the objects *in* the-world-for-us. By doing so, two levels of reflection, the-world-for-us and objects *within* the-world-for-us, are crossed which should never be crossed. There are objects in the-world-for-us and there is the-world-for-us as a *condition* for there being objects for us. This *condition*, the-world-for-us as manifestation or givenness of being, cannot be situated at the same level as objects *in* the-world-for-us. As he writes:

“to do so would engender a paradox which, like that of the liar, results from a confusion between discourse and its object. ... If you do so, you have simply violated one of the basic requirements for the transcendental – but you have not thereby refuted it, you have simply disregarded it.”¹²

The main point of this response is that the-world-for-us taken as a set of *conditions* or *forms* of cognition resides at the meta-level and may thus not be substantiated as an entity at the object level. By conflating both levels, one ignores the very meaning of the transcendental. At the transcendental level we say that there is the-world-for-us which forms or conditions our cognition of objects. At the object level we talk about objects, while realizing that the objects we talk about are given to us with respect to our human transcendental forms and conditions. And since we cannot know anything about the ontological nature of the-world-in-itself, we cannot say anything about the ‘in itself’ of those forms and conditions, preventing us from hypostatizing the-world-for-us. Now, I take this response to be apt. So how does Meillassoux aim to refute it? He argues that

“the core of the rejoinder consists in immunizing the conditions of knowledge from any discourse bearing on objects of science by arguing that a transcendental condition is not an object The notion of condition allows one to ‘de-ontologize’ the transcendental by putting it out of reach of any reflection about being”.¹³

This may be so, but why would this be objectionable according to him? He proceeds with a lengthy argument for the claim that the transcendental level *must* be instantiated at the object level. More precisely, given the-world-for-us, there must be *in* the-world-for-us cognitive subjects as instantiations of the transcendental level of knowledge. Now, it seems to me that this claim, *even if justified*, does nothing to refute the rejoinder of the correlationist. For, there is the-world-for-us. And within it the transcendental level of knowledge is instantiated at the object level. After all, the claim that there are human cognitive subjects is justified as a claim about the-world-for-us. Surely, the scientific claim that there were once no human beings at all is also justified as a claim about the-world-for-us. This claim however does *not* entail that the transcendental level of knowledge isn’t instantiated at the object level. So no problem for correlationism arises. But more importantly, I take it that Meillassoux’s argument for his claim that the transcendental level of knowledge is instantiated fails, so we do not even have to show that it imposes no problem for the correlationist.

In what follows I present his argument and argue that it does not succeed. The correlationist must concede “that *there is* a transcendental subject, rather than no subject”.¹⁴ Now, “there can only be a transcendental subject on condition that such a subject *takes place*.”¹⁵ This means that the transcendental subject “remains indissociable from the notion of a *point of view*.”¹⁶ For, as Meillassoux argues,

“a subject without any point of view on the world ... would have access to the world as a totality, without anything escaping from its instantaneous inspection of objective reality. But such a subject would thereby violate the essential finitude of the transcendental subject. ... The world for it would no longer be a horizon but rather an exhaustively known object.”¹⁷

This, as he points out, contradicts that subject being a transcendental subject. Hence, the transcendental subject “is posited as a point of view on the world, and hence as taking *place* at the heart of the world. The subject is transcendental only insofar as it is positioned *in* the world.”¹⁸ From this it follows that “the transcendental subject is localized among the finite objects of its world.”¹⁹ Thus, the transcendental subject “remains indissociable from its incarnation in a body; in other words, it is indissociable from a determinate object in the world.”²⁰ So, a transcendental subject of knowledge is always a subject *in* the-world-for-us, which concludes Meillassoux’s argument.

Is this argument convincing? Does it show that there being instantiated subjects *in* the-world-for-us is a necessary condition for the taking place of the transcendental? Must a transcendental subject be instantiated by a body in the-world-for-us? The only valid answer on correlationism is: we don’t know. The possibility of a transcendental uninstantiated subject cannot be ruled out on correlationism, since we do not know anything about the nature of the-world-in-itself. Indeed, Meillassoux’s argument fails. Clearly, transcendental subjects do have a point of view on the world. But why would it follow from this that they need to be instantiated between the objects *in* the-world-for-us? That is, why must a transcendental subject be instantiated within the-world-for-us in order to have a viewpoint on the world? This doesn’t follow at all. On classical theism, regardless of whether it is true or false, God has a point of view on the world. But God is clearly not localized as a subject within the world. Should we now conclude that classical theism is conceptually incoherent? Of course not, it might be false – but conceptually incoherent? That is simply not plausible. The argument for the claim that all transcendental subjects are instantiated in the-world-for-us thus fails. But then Meillassoux’s alleged refutation of the rejoinder of the correlationist is not convincing. Consequently, the argument from ancestry against correlationism doesn’t succeed. Correlationism stands unrefuted. The circle, the *for-us*, isn’t broken.

5. The argument from factuality

Yet, later on in his book he presents another argument against correlationism. It is called *the argument from factuality*. Let me quote the crucial passage. In this passage Meillassoux addresses the correlationist:

“When you think of [realism and idealism] as "possible", how are you able to access this possibility? How are you able to think this "possibility of ignorance" which leaves [both] eventualities open? The truth is that you are only able to think this possibility of ignorance because you have actually thought the absoluteness of this possibility, which is to say, its non-correlational character. Let me make myself clear, for this is the crux of the matter. So long as you maintain that your scepticism towards all knowledge of the absolute is based upon an argument, rather than upon mere belief or opinion, then you have to grant that the core of any such argument must be thinkable. But the core of your argument is that we can access everything's capacity-not-to-be, or capacity-to-be-other, our own as well as the world's. But once again, to say that one can think this is to say that one can think the absoluteness of the possibility of everything.”²¹

Meillassoux's argument seems to be that the correlationist must concede that she presumes an absolute, namely the *absolute possibility* of any proposition about the in-itself. The correlationist therefore presupposes an absolute. But this renders correlationism self-refuting, since on this view every posited *in-itself* is inevitably relativized to a *for-us*.

This argument though is untenable. For, indeed, the correlationist thinks the absoluteness of both possibilities. After all, the correlationist is thinking about a possibility with respect to the in-itself and not with respect to the correlation. But this absolute must be understood correctly. What is the correlationist actually saying? For all we know, she says, realism about the in-itself might be true. Similarly, as the correlationist has it, for all we know idealism about the in-itself might be true. As the 'for all we know' already indicates, both assertions of the correlationist about the in-itself are claims about the absence of knowledge of the in-itself. That is to say, the correlationist merely affirms that realism and idealism are *epistemic* possibilities. She is not affirming that these possibilities are *ontological* possibilities. For that would entail that he or she knows something about the in-itself, which contradicts correlationism. So the correlationist is affirming nothing more than epistemic possibilities of ignorance. He or she is not saying anything positive about the ontological nature of the in-itself. No knowledge of the in-itself is claimed, which is entirely consistent with

correlationism. Meillassoux has thus not broken the correlationist circle. He didn't regain access to the absolute.

6. The Galilean event

In his final chapter Meillassoux provides his third argument against correlationism. This argument departs from what he calls the Galilean event. Galileo discovered that science is able to mathematize nature. The whole of physical reality, all its structural and dynamical aspects, can be mathematically described. It appears that the world is

“exhaustively mathematizable – the mathematizable no longer designates an aspect of the world that is essentially immersed within the non-mathematizable (i.e. the surface or trajectory, which is merely the surface or trajectory of a moving body), it now indicates a world capable of autonomy – a world wherein bodies as well as their movements can be described independently of their sensible qualities, such as flavor, smell, heat, etc.”²²

By doing so science reveals to us for the first time a world independent of “any of those aspects that constitute its concreteness for us”.²³ The idea seems to be that the world as described by science becomes inherently mathematical and thus indifferent to precisely those concrete secondary qualities that have always linked the physical world for so many centuries to human observers. In other words, mathematical science presents us a world separate from us. The mathematization of nature exposes a physical reality that is completely independent of human existence. It thus uncovers a world that exists in and of itself, that is, a world that is what it is whether we exist or not. Meillassoux writes: “Modern science uncovers the speculative but hypothetical import of every mathematical reformulation of the world. Consequently, ... what is mathematizable cannot be reduced to a correlate of thought.”²⁴

Mathematical science thus unfolds a world independent of any human relation to the world, so that correlationism should be given up. Now, this argument seems not convincing either. Human beings are capable both of sense experience and thought. Further, mathematics is plausibly a product of human thought. But then anyone who argues that the *sensible non-mathematical* qualities of the world indicate a relation to human beings, must admit that the *mathematical* qualities of the world do so as well. In other words, if it can be argued that sensible concrete qualities link the world to us as human observers, it can be argued that the world's mathematically intelligible features link it to humans as well.

That the world appears exhaustively mathematizable can in fact be cashed out as an argument for the claim that we only have access to the-world-for-us. Let me explain. Mathematics can be applied successfully to the world. But why is this so? Why is the physical world so perfectly mathematizable? This asks for some kind of explanation. On metaphysical realism, there does not seem to be a straightforward explanation (although some philosophers have opted for a theistic solution). However, on a world-for-us epistemology, the almost perfect applicability of mathematics to reality is no surprise. For, if mathematics is just extended rigorous thought, which seems plausible, then it is no wonder at all that the world *as it is thought by us*, that is to say, the-world-for-us, is inherently mathematically intelligible. Indeed, on an epistemology according to which we humans can only access the-world-for-us, the successful applicability of mathematical thought is something we would expect. So nature's almost exhaustive mathematizability does actually increase the likelihood of correlationism over metaphysical realism. But then Meillassoux's third argument does not succeed either.

7. Closing Remarks

In this paper I presented and refuted three arguments by Quentin Meillassoux against the meta-epistemic position that he has coined *correlationism* in his much discussed book *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. His three original arguments, that is, the argument from ancestrality, the argument from facticity, and the argument from the almost perfect mathematization of nature are interesting and thought provoking. Nevertheless, given that these new arguments do not succeed, correlationism stands unrefuted. The 'codicil of modernity' is therefore still with us. Now, until and unless other more convincing objections are proposed, the 'for us' remains inescapable.

¹ Michael Dummett, *Origins of Analytical Philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993, 6.

² Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Trans. Ray Brassier. New York: Continuum, 2008.

³ Meillassoux, 5.

⁴ Meillassoux, 11.

⁵ Meillassoux, 6.

⁶ Meillassoux, 11.

⁷ Meillassoux, 13.

⁸ Emanuel Rutten, *Het kenbare noumenale: transcendentie binnen de-wereld-voor-ons*.

Amsterdam: VU University, 2010.

⁹ Meillassoux, 10.

¹⁰ Meillassoux, 17.

¹¹ Meillassoux, 22.

¹² Meillassoux, 23.

¹³ Meillassoux, 24.

¹⁴ Meillassoux, 24.

¹⁵ Meillassoux, 24.

¹⁶ Meillassoux, 24.

¹⁷ Meillassoux, 24.

¹⁸ Meillassoux, 25.

¹⁹ Meillassoux, 25.

²⁰ Meillassoux, 25.

²¹ Meillassoux, 58.

²² Meillassoux, 115.

²³ Meillassoux, 115.

²⁴ Meillassoux, 117.