THE NECESSITY OF CONTINGENCY

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It is true that thinking beings evolved on earth, and it is also true that there are infinitely many prime numbers. Nevertheless, we can intuitively distinguish between the manner in which these statements are true using so called modal language (e.g., ‘could’, ‘might’, ‘cannot’, ‘must’, etc.). We would be inclined to agree that it might not have been the case that we evolved, and thus that, insofar as it is possible that the world could have been otherwise, the existence of human life is contingent. By contrast, we would be inclined to deny that there might have been only finite primes, and thus that, insofar as it is impossible that the world could have been otherwise, the existence of infinite primes is necessary. However, this seemingly intuitive distinction is merely the tip of the modal iceberg, beneath which lies a variety of options for understanding how we reason with modal statements (modal logic) and interpreting what they tell us about reality (modal metaphysics). Without digging too deeply into this topic, it is necessary to introduce a few technical distinctions that help clarify the significance of Meillassoux’s claims.

On the one hand, there are what Meillassoux calls ‘real possibilities’, or ways the world could possibly be in itself. The technical name for this is alethic modality, and it is often differentiated into further kinds. For example, one can draw a distinction between logical necessity and nomological necessity, or between those truths that are invariant with respect to the laws of thought (usually including mathematics) and those truths that are invariant with respect to the laws of nature (usually defined by physics). This means that there can be a sense in which it is (nomologically) necessary that planets orbit stars even though it is (logically) possible that they could do otherwise. On the other hand, there are what Meillassoux calls ‘possibilities of ignorance’, or ways the world could possibly be as far as we know. The technical name for this is epistemic modality, and it is usually relative to shared certainty within discursive contexts. For example, we might agree that JFK was actually assassinated, but disagree about whether Oswald did it, and thus be inclined to say it’s necessary that someone fired the fatal shot, but that it’s possible it was Oswald or a gunman on the grassy knoll. Though alethic and epistemic modals are related, they can diverge, such as when we say that Goldbach’s conjecture might be true (epistemic), even though if it is true, it is must be true (alethic).
Meillassoux’s thesis regarding the necessity of contingency is first introduced negatively: as the principle of unreason. He opposes this to the principle of sufficient reason, which for him was the essence of metaphysical dogmatism, insofar as the claim that there is a reason for each state of affairs collapses into the claim that there is a reason for all of them. This inevitably leads to the onto-theological demand for a necessary entity (e.g. Aristotle’s God) or set of entities (e.g., Plato’s Ideas), or an absolute capable of grounding both (alethic) necessity and (epistemic) certainty. The critical philosophy which followed abandoned onto-theology only at the expense of qualifying sufficient reason and adopting a correlationism that rejects all absolutes. By contrast, Meillassoux aims to present the unqualified absence of reasons (unreason) as a post-critical absolute, thereby demonstrating the impossibility of necessary entities.

He does this by proceeding through the arguments supplied by correlationism: the circle of correlation against naïve realism, and the argument from facticity against absolute idealism. The former argument holds that we can only have knowledge of things as they appear for us, within the correlation, never as they are in themselves. Absolute idealism responds to this challenge by denying that what is in itself is distinct from what is for us, thereby absolutizing the correlation. The latter argument counters this by insisting upon the facticity of the correlation, insofar as the possibility that thought could cease to exist guarantees its distinctness from the world it thinks. Meillassoux radicalises this by claiming that the argument requires that thought’s non-existence be not merely epistemically possible (for us), but alethically possible (in itself), thereby absolutizing facticity. Furthermore, he holds this implies a primordial power capable of completely transforming the contents of the world from one moment to the next without reason, which he names absolute time or hyper-chaos.

The transition from an epistemological thesis about the availability of reasons into an ontological thesis about the capacity for radical change is consolidated in its positive reformulation: as the principle of factiality. The key to this lies in Meillassoux’s subversion of correlationism’s skeptical procedure, which enables one to invoke the epistemic possibility that the for us differs from the in itself in any discursive context, so as to undermine every claim to certainty. The general applicability of this procedure transforms the epistemic contingency it appeals to from something relative to a given discourse into something absolute. However, there is an internal limit to this applicability, insofar as the procedure cannot be applied to this absolute without undermining its generality. This ‘non-iterability of facticity’ constitutes the necessity of
contingency, and thereby reveals the *necessary conditions* of contingency. These ‘figures of factuality’ are immune to correlationist skepticism insofar as they constitute the *ontological structure* of contingent facts.

We can’t discuss the figures that Meillassoux actually derives (*the principle of non-contradiction* and the *necessary existence of something rather than nothing*) in detail, but it is important to note that Meillassoux’s ultimate aim is to show that logic and mathematics are factial, and thereby ground their scientific application to matters of fact. This indicates that the absolutization of facticity hinges upon the *overlap* between epistemic modality and alethic modality when it comes to logical necessity, insofar as it converts the *epistemological conditions* of factual disagreement into the *ontological structure* of facts. In turn, this suggests that the inference from absolute facticity to absolute time hinges upon the *gap* between (atemporal) logical necessity and (temporal) nomological necessity, insofar as it converts the *logical possibility* that things could be otherwise into the *nomological possibility* that things could become otherwise. The question that remains for critics of Meillassoux’s thesis is thus whether it conflates the epistemic contingency of nomological necessity with the logical necessity of nomological contingency.

**Metaphysics / Onto-Theology**

**Facticity**

**Principle of Sufficient Reason**

**Laws**

**Absolute Time**

**Hyper-Chaos**