

A CRITIQUE OF SPECULATIVE MATERIALISM'S CRITIQUE OF KANT'S CRITICISM

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Abstract: This paper aims at clarifying the Kantian ontological position by confronting the criticisms of Speculative Materialism. The article has then two goals, negatively to show that Speculative Materialism fails to destroy the Kantian critical system, positively to provide a sharper version of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason thanks to its confrontation with Speculative Materialism. In the following essay, we will oppose the speculative materialist interpretation of Kant to our analysis concerning the following points: the arche-fossil and the meaning of possible experience, the interpretation of the stability of nature and the status of the thing-in-itself, the anti-frequentalist argument and the relation between the contingency of the laws of nature and the stability of the phenomenal order, the possibility to inverse our ignorance of the thing-in-itself into a knowledge of the thing-in-itself, and the validity of the Kantian descriptive analytical method. Such radicalization of Kant and the critique of his critics is required to prevent a hasty overcoming of correlationism which in fact leaves correlationism intact. A first step to overcome correlationism would be then to deploy its full power which will allow us to measure the difficulty of such enterprise and hence prepare for a radical critique of Kantian criticism.

Keywords: Correlationism; Kant; Speculative Materialism; Meillassoux; Ray Brassier

THE ARCHE-FOSSIL AND POSSIBLE EXPERIENCE

A first line of Meillassoux's criticism of the Kantian system can be reduced to two confusions, the first one consisting in identifying the Kantian notion of possible experience to the actual possibility of experiencing, and the second consisting in considering the relation of the transcendental subject to what the transcendental subject conditions as an actual and immediate relation between the condition

and the conditioned, rather than a mediated one occurring through the material of experience.

The first confusion, as exposed in Brassier's account of the debate against correlationism, is sustained by two arguments, the first addressing the distinction between the lacuna *of* and *in* manifestation and the second addressing the instantiation of the transcendental in Man. Brassier shows that the arche-fossil is a material that points to a time prior to any intelligent life, i.e. an ancestral time or object, and hence the arche-fossil provides the objective proof establishing a time where manifestation itself was lacking.¹ The importance of the arche-fossil lies in the challenge it throws to transcendentalism because the arche-fossil establishes the existence of the ancestral object as an object of scientific knowledge, and yet the ancestral object cannot face a knowing subject given that any form of life cannot co-exist with such object. It seems then that our knowledge of the ancestral is a knowledge prior to any manifestation, and hence it is a knowledge of how things are in themselves rather than of how they just appear to us. To that objection, the correlationist would reply that the ancestral object is simply another case of an unperceived phenomena, claiming that if there had been a witness the witness would have observed the ancestral object unfolding as described by science.² The imperceptibility of the ancestral object would be equivalent to the unperceived back of a paper, i.e. it would be a simple lacuna *in* manifestation that we can overcome by modifying our position of observation. Brassier is quick to reply that the ancestral object doesn't point to a simple lacuna *in* manifestation, but rather to a lacuna *of* manifestation as such. Indeed, the ancestral object is simply un-observable because no living soul can exist to undertake such observation, and hence the ancestral object is an impossible object of perception. If manifestation is the correlate of the knowing-perceiving subject it follows that the ancestral object is an object that we can know scientifically outside of any manifested realm.³

¹ Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound* (Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 49.

² Brassier, 54.

³ Brassier, 55.

This is where Brassier's account of the argument on manifestation stops. We can see that the crux of the counter argument proposed by Brassier relies on the firm conviction that for there to be a manifestation an intelligent living subject must be *present* to the object, which is obviously impossible in the case of the ancestral object, but we can also add, in the case of all kinds of objects that would annihilate life if observed – such as atomic explosions and the like –, infinitely distant objects that can never be reached by a living human being,⁴ or objects that are too small to observe because the observation data stands in place of the object.⁵ Langton argues in an opposite line showing that possible experience extends to all what can affect the subject and not to what is actually observed or can be possibly observed, and hence includes all kinds of situations in possible experience,⁶ be it the infinitely remote or small.⁷

It remains that these different positions are mistaken as to the nature of transcendental conditioning. In fact, possible experience is simply the *form of experience* and not in any way the *possibility of actually experiencing* some object, or even *actually being affected* by the object.⁸ This misinterpretation can be also spotted in Brassier's arguments concerning Kant's consideration on the extension of the

⁴ Brassier, 58.

⁵ Harald A. Wiltsche, 'Science, Realism and Correlationism. A Phenomenological Critique of Meillassoux' Argument from Ancestrality.', *European Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 3 (September 2017): 808–32.

⁶ Even if Langton considerably extends the notion of possible experience to include all what can affect the subject, it remains that this conception of possible experience can't counter the argument of the arche-fossil given that it would be difficult to maintain that events that occurred billions of years ago affect humans. Langton could counter object that the category of community solves such issue because events that occurred billions of years ago are still, in a way affecting us. It remains that such emphasis on Kant's realism misses the conception of possible experience as the form of experience and still flirts with an anthropomorphic reduction of Kantianism.

⁷ Rae Langton, *Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves*, Book, Whole (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 186–204, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199243174.001.0001>.

⁸ "The thoroughgoing and synthetic unity of perceptions is precisely what constitutes the form of experience, and it is nothing other than the synthetic unity of the appearances in accordance with concepts." Immanuel Kant, *Critic of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 234/A111.

causal series⁹ where Brassier understands the prolongation of the chain of experience as an *actual prolongation*, arguing that it is impossible to prolong the chain of experience to the time of the arche-fossil because experience itself depends on the emergence of life.¹⁰ I would argue that the prolongation of the chain of experience is not the prolongation of an actual experience but rather the prolongation of our *represented experience in conformity with possible experience*. What Kant maintains is that our knowledge of un-observable objects is still in conformity with possible experience, because it is derived from the extension of our representation in accordance with the form of experience. Kant himself already pointed out in the *Postulate of Empirical Thinking in General* that our cognition of things reaches as far as we can extend our empirical laws,¹¹ even if the constitution of our bodies or perceptive organs can't apprehend these objects.¹² In a Kantian perspective possible experience is then only the form of

⁹ "The real things of past time are given in the transcendental object of experience, but for me they are objects and real in past time only insofar as I represent to myself that, in accordance with empirical laws, or in other words, the course of the world, a regressive series of possible perceptions (whether under the guidance of history or in the footsteps of causes and effects) leads to a time-series that has elapsed as the condition of the present time, which is then represented as real only in connection with a possible experience and not in itself." Kant, 513/A495.

¹⁰ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 52.

¹¹ "We cognize the existence of a magnetic matter penetrating all bodies from the perception of attracted iron fillings, although an immediate perception of this matter is impossible for us given the constitution of our organs. [...] Thus wherever perception and whatever is appended to it in accordance with empirical laws reaches, there too reaches our cognition of the existence of things. If we do not begin with experience, or proceed in accordance with laws of the empirical connection of appearances, then we are only making a vain display of wanting to discover or research the existence of anything." Kant, *Critic of Pure Reason*, 326/A223-26.

¹² This point is also defended by Beizaei showing that we can indeed reach from perceptions to objective experience (Beizaei, 2017), and by Chiurazzi that shows that only a conceptual construction can posit a reality as independent from sensations. As Chiurazzi puts it: "Copernicus and Kant understood that we are capable of comprehending that reality is independent of our sensations and empirical conceptualizations precisely because we have concepts, because we are capable of conceptualizing experience, through inferences, universalizations, and all of those operations that correspond to what Kant calls "pure concepts" (which are not the concept of a chair or a platypus, as tends to be assumed in neo-realist discussions.) Far from negating the exteriority of reality, the concept affirms it: but it affirms it because it is capable of placing a distance between knowledge and reality." Gaetano Chiurazzi, 'Reality and Possibility: A Defense of Kant

the knowable, of how we can *picture* the unfolding of phenomena, i.e. that any object we think about will be inscribed in space, time, will be a substance or composed of substances, and these substances will have causal interactions. It is clear in this sense that the ancestral object is an object that fits the transcendental conditions as an object dated in time, inscribed in space, and featuring substantiality and being part of causal chains. Kant repeatedly reminds us that if we don't organize the sensorial data provided by the thing-in-itself into a knowledge that is in conformity with the transcendental organization, i.e. with the form of possible experience, this knowledge would be a non-sense for us, or an unthinkable knowledge. It remains that Kant never claimed that a human being must be present to the extended chain of organized appearances, but only that these appearances must conform with possible experience for them to be something for us rather than nothing.¹³ In this sense the organization of the arche-fossil data into the ancestral object still bears the mark of the transcendental forms and hence doesn't contradict in any way the Kantian spirit. Last we can add that we didn't need to wait for contemporary sciences to teach us about ancestral objects, such as the accretion of the earth, and to provide us with the objective proof regarding objects existing prior to Man,¹⁴ given that Kant himself was quite aware of such objects to which he dedicated one of his early writings, *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heaven*, where he tried to give an account of the emergence of the solar system and the earth¹⁵ by following

against New Realisms', *Research in Phenomenology* 48, no. 2 (2018): 197–208, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691640-12341391>.

¹³ "It is all the same to the outcome whether I say that in the empirical progress in space I could encounter stars that are a hundred times farther from me than the most distant ones I see, or whether I say that perhaps they are there to be encountered in world-space even if no human being has ever perceived them or ever will perceive them; for if they were given as things in themselves, without any reference to possible experience at all, then they would be nothing for me, hence they would not be objects contained in the series of the empirical regress." Kant, *Critic of Pure Reason*, 514/A496.

¹⁴ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2010), 10.

¹⁵ "Our Earth perhaps existed for a thousand years or more before it was in a condition to be able to support human beings, animals, and plants." Immanuel Kant, *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*, trans. Ian Johnston (Virginia: Richer Resources Publications, 2008), 144.

a Newtonian approach. We can see then that it is only if we reduce Kantianism to an anthropomorphism, possible experience to the actual possibility of experiencing, and the correlation to the object as an actual relation of presence to the object, that the ancestral object can function as an efficient critique of correlationism.

The instantiation of the transcendental is the second argument against transcendentalism reiterating the same misinterpretation of ‘possible experience’. The anti-correlationists, are now convinced that science has access to the arche-fossil as it is in itself because of the impossibility we have to experience such object and armed with such conviction they give priority to the scientific approach as the only one allowing us to access the being in itself of all the other objects. Given that science describes a universe from which Man, and hence manifestation and correlation, emerge at one point in time and are bound to disappear at another, it must itself be the paradigm explaining manifestation as any other empirical object rather than letting phenomenology, or the study of the structures of manifestation, be the ultimate explanatory paradigm.¹⁶ The correlationist response to this objection will consist in pointing at a paralogism in the use of the transcendental notions¹⁷. A correlationist would object that there is a circularity in the use of the causal category because any causal relation presupposes the transcendental conditioning and hence this relation is inapplicable on the causal transcendental category as such: by claiming that something is the *cause* of the transcendental subject we use the category of causality and hence a feature of the transcendental subject to explain the transcendental subject, falling by that into a circle. The anti-correlationist concedes to this line of argumentation but claims that Kant’s conception of the *finitude* of the subject implies that the conditions do not exist in themselves, such as in some independent eternal Spirit, but characterize the way of knowing relative to human beings.¹⁸ Hence, even if the

¹⁶ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 53.

¹⁷ Brassier, 56.

¹⁸ “Indeed, this is precisely what distinguishes transcendental subjectivity in its purported finitude from any metaphysical hypostatization of the principle of subjectivity which would render it equivalent to an infinitely

transcendental conditions as such cannot be considered as existing spatio-temporal objects, it remains that these conditions need to be instantiated in an empirical support, Man, and thus are dependent on that material support to “exist”.¹⁹ It follows then that in times where Man doesn’t exist the transcendental conditions for manifestation also don’t exist, and hence manifestation as such doesn’t exist. Yet, given that the ancestral object is an object that science is capable of describing as existing prior to Man, it follows that we can be ascertained that science is describing here the object as it is in itself and not as it belongs to the sphere of manifestation because no manifestation can co-exist with such object²⁰. We can sum up this first line of argumentation and the confusion it entails in the following reasoning:

1. Manifestation depends on some subject as the condition of manifestation.
2. Some objects point to situations where the existence of such subject is actually impossible.
3. Hence the account of such objects is an account of how they are in themselves because these objects cannot coexist with any subject.²¹

Against this argument we have shown that we can extend the causal chain way beyond human existence as long as we follow the available empirical laws, and hence we can conceive of situations where intelligent and human life didn’t exist and that are yet in conformity with possible experience, i.e. with the form of experience. Hence, even if the correlationist accepts that the transcendental conditions are instantiated for a period of time equal to that of the existence of Man, this doesn’t mean that now possible experience must be limited to this

enduring substance. But as finite, transcendental subjectivity is indissociable from the determinate set of material conditions which provide its empirical support.” Brassier, 57.

¹⁹ Brassier, 57.

²⁰ Brassier, 58.

²¹ This argument can be read as an inversed version of the idealist Gem criticized by Brassier in his article “Concepts and Objects” Levi R. Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, Book, Whole (Melbourne, Victoria, S. Aust: re.press, 2011), 57–58.. I argue that both arguments are in fact fallacious because they conflate the epistemological and the ontological dimensions, making inferences from one to the other.

period of time where we have an actual manifestation: from that short-lived period in manifestation, Man can organize a causal representation of the universe that stretches way beyond his existence. We can see then that the confusion the anti-correlationist always reiterates is the one between *possible experience* and *actual manifestation*, while in fact, possible experience only names the form and conditions of objective representation.²² We can say then that possible experience is instantiated during the time of manifestation, and yet it extends way beyond that time as the form of the objective representation produced during that time, and that the content of this representation can depict objects that don't strictly belong to the time where these *objects* were produced: I can produce *today* the ancestral object out of the observation of the arche-fossil material, by that I represent the ancestral material in an object, but this doesn't mean that the time where we are constructing such representation must be identical to the represented time in this representation.

To this new objection, the anti-correlationist would reply that if the correlationist accepts that, at the time of the ancestral object, humans *objectively* didn't exist, and yet claim that *objectively* the ancestral object is a spatio-temporal-substantial-causal object, he must concede that these determinations are not human dependent because time, space, substance, and causality shouldn't have existed back then. At this point we touch a more profound confusion that sustains the anti-correlationist critique, a confusion that concerns the nature of the relation between the transcendental conditioning and the phenomena being conditioned. Indeed, the anti-correlationist considers that if the correlationist accepts that the ancestral object is objectively spatio-temporal-substantial-causal and accepts that Man objectively didn't exist at the time of the arche-fossil, and yet claims that space-time-substance-causality are manifestations dependent on Man, he would be contradicting himself because he would be proving that the ancestral object is spatio-temporal-substantial-causal and yet that nor space, nor time, nor substance, nor causality did exist back then. Meillassoux calls this

²² Gilles Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: The Athlone Press, 1984), 62.

contradiction a *non-sense*, given that the correlationist will confer objectivity to the ancestral object and yet withhold that the ancestral object is indeed such as it is objectively being described because it cannot be the correlate of a consciousness and hence have the objective features it is supposed to have.²³ As Meillassoux continues, that non-sense consists in having a truthful statement whose referent cannot yet exist in the way it is truthfully described. Hence the extension of the causal chains beyond human existence either lead to the contradiction of transcendentalism with itself or forces the transcendentalist to abandon his conviction that space-time-substance-causality are describing the phenomenon and accepts that science describes indeed the thing-in-itself in its independence from the knowing subject.²⁴ The new argument can then be summed up in the following reasoning:

1. If an object is objectively spatio-temporal-substantial-causal it follows that it must exist as having these features.
2. If Man can't exist in some situations to produce the transcendental features, it follows that the object cannot have these features.
3. Hence either transcendentalism is self-contradictory, or space-time-substance-causality describe the thing-in-itself.

We can see that the presupposition that sustains this argument relies on the conviction that if an object is truthfully displaying the transcendental features it follows that these features must be supported by the presence of the transcendental subject that will actually make these features appear in the object. The presupposition is then that the relation between the transcendental subject and the object is a relation of actual dependency. This means that objectivity is understood as *being actually the case*, i.e. if the ancestral object is spatio-temporal-substantial-causal this means that such features are actually present in the object which is actually in space-time, is actually a substance and a cause. But, in the Kantian system *objectivity is itself an appearance*, a way of giving form to the sensorial

²³ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 16.

²⁴ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 63.

material and *make it appear as such and such objectivity*. Hence if the ancestral object features some transcendental traits this only means that the ancestral object is the form that objectively organizes the arche-fossil sensorial data. The transcendental subject acts then on the material data and gives it a form that is in conformity to possible experience, and where the material joined to this form constitute an objective picture of the universe as described in the sciences.²⁵ The relation between the transcendental subject and his objects is then mediated by the sensorial data provided by the thing-in-itself, that Kant often calls the material of representation, and hence it is a mediated relation of an actual production of a representation and not an immediate relation of an actual production of a presentation.²⁶ In the representational realm we can then picture all kinds of objective phenomena out of the material, and these pictures can depict the beginning and end of Man, because they are pictures produced by Man rather than presences requiring the sustained activity of the conditioning subject. Hence, in the same way as an artist can produce the picture representing his own death, or the end of the world, science produces objective pictures about the beginning and end of our existence, and that without any contradiction.

The Kantian major breakthrough is to show that *objectivity as such is the form of the sensorial material*: “ancestral” only names the form we give to the observation of decaying radioactive atoms. In Kant’s view the principle of unity of any manifold is the self-aware unifying activity of the transcendental subject, the famous Object X, where the subject is able to gather the sensorial data and name it such and such, without the need for the object of actually having such and such features: when we say that “the cinnabar is red and heavy”, “cinnabar” names the unifying subjective act applied on redness and heaviness, i.e. our self-conscious

²⁵ Paul Ennis, ‘The Transcendental Core of Correlationism’, *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2011): 45.

²⁶ “There is no doubt whatever that all our cognition begins with experience; for how else should the cognitive faculty be awakened into exercise if not through objects that stimulate our senses and in part themselves produce representations, in part bring the activity of our understanding into motion to compare these, to connect or separate them, and thus to work up the raw material of sensible impressions into a cognition of objects that is called experience?” Kant, *Critic of Pure Reason*, 136/B1.

apprehension of such sensorial material, and not some substantial thing dwelling beneath its properties.²⁷ Hence, we can objectively say that the “cinnabar is red and heavy”, or “the ancestral object is billions of years old”, without the need of having a cinnabar or an arche-fossil *out there*. The argument of *non-sense* withheld against Kant in the name of the arche-fossil can be made then by calling forth any mundane object yielding predicative judgements because for Kant *none of the objects we know off actually bear their properties*: we can't even say that the cinnabar *itself* is red and heavy because cinnabar only *names* the relation *we* establish between redness and heaviness. If for Meillassoux it is a non-sense to say that “the ancestral object is billions of years old” but it is not *literarily so*²⁸, a Kantian would reply that no object is *literary* what it is because ‘object’ stands for our apprehensive awareness building stable relations between the sensorial data²⁹. The confusion of Meillassoux is complex at this level: first he confuses objectivity with literality, claiming that the object itself must be this or that as having such and such property if it is said to be such and such; second he establishes a direct relation of production between the transcendental subject and the transcendental features he is supposed to furnish the object with ; and third he concludes that if the transcendental subject can't be present to the object hence the object can't have the features conveyed by the subject while yet having them objectively, whence the contradiction. A Kantian would reply that first an object is simply the subjective form of unification of the manifold and hence it is never *itself* such and such even if we say that it is such and such; second that the object doesn't

²⁷ Kant, 230–34/A103–110.

²⁸ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 14.

²⁹ In his article “Identity and Objectivity: An Inquiry into Kant's Transcendental Deduction”, Dieter argues that this conception of the object is the only one in conformity with the conception of sense data as a multiplicity of disjointed events: “This problematic becomes evident to Kant in connection with one of the elementary assumptions that he shares with the theory of knowledge of his time, namely, that the primary occurrences of the real for cognition are presentations of simple qualities in diffuse spatial juxtaposition [...] Not only are objects related to each other in a regulated manner, but they are also quite simply defined in terms of complexes of properties and states, complexes which for their part are to be thought solely with reference to the regulated relations effected between them.” Dieter Henrich and Richard L. Velkley, *The Unity of Reason: Essays on Kant's Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994), 130–32.

directly receive the transcendental features from the subject as if receiving some extra properties, but rather that the object itself is the form of the sensorial data and hence will necessarily have the transcendental features because they are the general forms of experience as such and hence are predicated of any object without being properties of these objects; and third that the objective production and organization of some sensorial data into objects is not limited to the properties and times predicated to these objects.

In the Kantian perspective the object is then the way *we make sense* of some given sensorial data, and hence there isn't any *non-sense* in claiming that the ancestral object is truly billions of years old and that this object is not *actually itself* billions of years old. To reduce transcendental conditioning to an actual direct conditioning of the object is to miss the representational and constructive dimension of transcendentalism and to bracket the mediating role of the sensorial data as constituting its material: object only names a form of organization of some sensorial data and not a thing standing there having properties or receiving some properties³⁰. In fact, it is this misconception that is at the heart of the anti-correlationist critique and the ground for Speculative Materialism. As we will see, this misconception of objectivity is itself the consequence of a deeper misconception concerning the stability of nature and the status of the thing-in-itself.³¹

THE STABILITY OF NATURE AND KANT'S CONCEPTUAL DOUBLE-BIND

The status of thing-in-itself is at play in the interpretation of what is known as the "*cinnabar passage*":

³⁰ This misunderstanding is exemplified by Ferraris (Ferraris, 2015, p. 216). It is clear in his text that he establishes a direct relation between the transcendental subject and the object of representation. The point I am defending is that the object names the unity of the manifold, and hence it is always what results from the application of the transcendental categories on the manifold to make sense of the manifold.

³¹ As a general critique of Meillassoux criticism of Kant and its lack of precision as to secondary references we can refer to David Golumbia, "'Correlationism': The Dogma that Never Was" David Golumbia, "'Correlationism': The Dogma That Never Was", *Boundary 2* 43, no. 2 (1 May 2016): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-3469889>.

“If cinnabar were now red, now black, now light, now heavy, if a human being were now changed into this animal shape, now into that one, if on the longest day the land were covered now with fruits, now with ice and snow, then my empirical imagination would never even get the opportunity to think of heavy cinnabar on the occasion of the representation of the color red; or if a certain word were attributed now to this thing, now to that, or if one and the same thing were sometimes called this, sometimes that, without the governance of a certain rule to which the appearances are already subjected in themselves, then no empirical synthesis of reproduction could take place.”³²

Interpreting this passage, Brassier considers that a high rate of transformation of appearances will inhibit the act of synthesis of these appearances into objects.³³ Hence for science to be possible we need to consider that nature has a given uniformity, and that science simply builds on this given uniformity an objective representation. The goal of this passage, as interpreted by Brassier and Meillassoux, is to allow Kant to prove, against Hume, that an objective stability must preexist psychological associations and be the condition to build such habitual associations. Indeed, for Hume, if we experience a stable relation between redness and heaviness it is only because of our psychological habits that push us to anticipate the second property when we see the first, while in fact nothing guarantees that heaviness will indeed follow after the perception of redness. For Kant on the other hand, if the cinnabar was sometimes red sometimes heavy, meaning if it didn't have any form of some given stability, the psyche wouldn't have the opportunity to withhold red as the proper of cinnabar in order to be able to associate it with heaviness, and by that build the habit that triggers the expectation of heaviness upon the perception of redness. Kant would be saying then that in order to have the possibility to build habits we need first to have a uniform unfolding of appearances, opposing by that Hume who claims that habits themselves are the conditions for the uniformity and stability of the appearances.³⁴

³² Kant, *Critic of Pure Reason*, 229-A101.

³³ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 79.

³⁴ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 136.

If, in the Kantian system, it is indeed correct to consider that objectivity and stability must precede and are the conditions for psychological habits and anticipations, it remains that the way Meillassoux and Brassier understand the reason and nature of such stability and objectivity is incorrect. In fact, both consider that there must be a *given uniformity at the level of the sensorial givens* and hence that such stability is not itself the product of the transcendental conditioning but rather a condition for their exercise: if such stability was not simply given, we wouldn't be able to build scientific objects, and a fortiori habits. It remains that such given stability defeats the whole purpose and power of transcendentalism, and when conceded it is the whole edifice of transcendental idealism that collapses into a form of transcendental realism.³⁵ Indeed, to claim that some uniformity is given out there, is simply to claim a form of unity, duration, and spatiality as given in themselves, and upon which the transcendental synthesis would only build some abstract representations, such as the formulation of the laws of nature and the like. But, such a claim is incorrect because it presupposes time, space and unity which are all transcendental features. Hence, we need to clarify the nature of this stability, i.e. is it given prior to the transcendental activity or is it itself produced by the transcendental activity? Such clarification touches on the nature of the sensorial data: is the sensorial data absolutely formless or does it have some kind of given stability at the sub-representational level?

To answer this question, we need to reinterpret the "cinnabar passage" without giving way to any form of given stability. In fact, an inner reading of the Kantian system shows that the transcendental laws are enough to generate the wished-for stability without the need to postulate such stability as existing independently from and prior to the transcendental organizational work. The passage itself states clearly that it is only if the appearances are subjected to *rules* that our empirical imagination will be able to bring a transition of the mind from

³⁵ K R Westphal, 'Affinity, Idealism, and Naturalism: The Stability of Cinnabar and the Possibility of Experience', *Kant-Studien* 88, no. 2 (1997): 139.

a given representation to the other,³⁶ let's say a transition from red to heavy. It is the synthetic law a priori stating, for example, that "substance persist"³⁷ that is the ground for the stability of appearances rather than a supposed given stability that would be the ground for the representation of persisting objects. Without this rule, i.e. "substance is permanent", we would never be able to say that cinnabar is objectively, and hence invariably, "red and heavy". Indeed, "cinnabar" cannot be something, a substance or an object, if it is not permanent but also, we can't experience something as a substance if we don't presuppose its permanence. This is why, even if we have apprehended a number of sensations only once, and labelled them "cinnabar", we know that these properties must form a permanent unity if they ought to refer to the substance "cinnabar". In the Kantian system, a substance is built by the process of progressive apprehension of different sensations, but once a substance is built it will keep its characteristic properties: for example, the first time I encountered that Chinese stone, I apprehended that peculiar red hue, then felt its heaviness, and called this pack of sensations "cinnabar". In the Kantian system then the rule, "substance is permanent", allows the construction of an object in conformity with this rule, and by that this object will always be what it is. In other terms, if one day I encounter the redness of cinnabar but when rushing to hold it I discover that the thing featuring that redness is light rather than heavy, I don't jump to the conclusion that cinnabar became all of a sudden a light stone but I rather consider that I was mistaken and that this thing I am holding now is simply not cinnabar but something else, and hence my subjective error is immediately turned into the apprehension of an objective substance, which I now label "plastic cinnabar". The synthetic laws a

³⁶ "This law of reproduction, however, presupposes that the appearances themselves are actually subject to such a rule, and that in the manifold of their representations an accompaniment or succession takes place according to certain rules; for without that our empirical imagination would never get to do anything suitable to its capacity, and would thus remain hidden in the interior of the mind, like a dead and to us unknown faculty." Kant, *Critic of Pure Reason*, 229/A100-101.

³⁷ "In fact the proposition that substance persists is tautological. For only this persistence is the ground for our application of the category of substance to appearance, and one should have proved that in all appearances there is something that persists, of which that which changes is nothing but the determination of its existence." Kant, 301/A184.

priori are able to confer stability to appearances because they implement in our apprehension of the sense data a *conceptual double bind*: the failures of our expectations do not challenge the permanence of the substances that we know about but rather allow their multiplication and diversification. It is in this sense that cinnabar cannot be sometimes red sometimes black, i.e. in the sense of a *conceptual objectivity* and not in the sense of an *actual stability*. It is the conceptual objectivity of the object “cinnabar” that is the ground for the experience of actual stability because if in our experience we encounter “redness and lightness”, this encounter doesn’t impair our old concept of cinnabar but rather creates a new objective conceptual entity, “plastic cinnabar”, which reinforces the overall conceptual objectivities and the stable experience of the world.³⁸

From that analysis we can see that for Meillassoux representation operates on a secondary degree, it is the representation of an already given stability, while for Kant representation is primary, meaning that the stability is itself part of the representational realm. For Kant, beneath and prior to the representational realm there is absolutely “nothing”, because as soon as we want to characterize that realm as something (stable, uniform, given, etc.) we enter the representational realm, and without noticing it we make use of the transcendental conditioning. But, by displacing representation to bear only on the production of objects out of a stable given order of appearances, Meillassoux ends up distorting the transcendental approach that now is closer to a form of dogmatism where our representation only represents the given order rather than creates givenness, stability and objectivity. For Meillassoux then objectivity is simply the description of stability, a second order representation built on a given first order stability, while for Kant objectivity and stability are both part of the representational realm, objectivity being, as we will see, the determination of stability, and where

³⁸ With the *conceptual double bind*, I depart from Béatrice Longuenesse reading that considers the conceptual unity as what motivates the synthesis but can’t explain the regularity of nature, reserving the latter to the synthetic reproduction of imagination. I consider then that the solution to Hume’s problem resides in such a double bind. Béatrice Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge*, trans. Charles Wolfe (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 40–44.

stability is the general form of manifestation given to the sensorial data.³⁹

THE ANTI-FREQUENTIALIST ARGUMENT

We have seen then that Meillassoux falsely attributes to Kant the belief that we must have a given stability, a misinterpretation having as a consequence the other false attribution that the laws of nature simply represent such underlying stability, which will lead, as we will see, to a third misinterpretation claiming that Kant believes that the laws of nature can't change, and that the causal order is a condition for empirical consciousness. This line of thought is explicitly exposed in the interpretation Meillassoux gives to the Kantian reply to the Hume's "billiard ball" thought experiment where the chock of billiard balls could lead to any outcome.⁴⁰ Meillassoux underlines that for Hume this thought experiment forces us to recognize that nothing proves that necessary laws govern nature and that only psychological habits can explain why we believe in such order.⁴¹ Meillassoux claims that Kant refutes Hume in view of establishing an objective order of nature by a reduction to the absurd proceeding as follow:

1. If we suppose that there is no causal necessity, then there will be such disorder among phenomena that any representation or consciousness would be impossible.

³⁹ Malabou seems to share Meillassoux's view conflating stability and objectivity as dependent on the necessary laws of nature. I depart on this point from Malabou even though I rejoin her when she says that Kant himself opened on absolute alterity in the third critique, in the living objects that threatens mechanical necessary laws. I argue on the other hand that such Chaos, or alterity, is already present in the form of the material sensations to which the laws give shape. Catherine Malabou, 'Can We Relinquish the Transcendental?', *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 28, no. 3 (2014): 242-55, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.28.3.0242>.

⁴⁰ "When I see, for instance, a Billiard-ball moving in a straight line towards another; even suppose motion in the second ball should by accident be suggested to me, as the result of their contact or impulse; may I not conceive, that a hundred different events might as well follow from that cause? May not both these balls remain at absolute rest? May not the first ball return in a straight line, or leap off from the second in any line or direction? All these suppositions are consistent and conceivable. Why then should we give the preference to one, which is no more consistent or conceivable than the rest? All our reasonings à priori will never be able to shew us any foundation for this preference." (Hume, 2007, p. 21)

⁴¹ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 88.

2. But, we have a fact of consciousness and representations.
3. Hence, there must be a necessary order.

Another Kantian argument mentioned by Meillassoux is that in order for Hume to imagine random effects from a given cause, flying billiard balls upon impulse, we need to have a stable context that frames this imaginary scenario, for example a stable billiard table, a room, etc.⁴² In both readings of the Kantian replies we can detect a misinterpretation of the Kantian rationality. Indeed, Meillassoux commits two slippages, the first consisting in directly correlating the fact of consciousness to the necessary causal order, and the second consisting in identifying the causal order to the laws of nature.

Regarding the first slippage, Kant would not directly correlate consciousness to the causal order but rather mediate their relation by the action of the transcendental subject on the sensorial data. Indeed, empirical consciousness and the causal order are simultaneous phenomena resulting from the conditioning of the thing-in-itself by the transcendental subject. Hence either we have an empirical consciousness *and* a causal order, or nothing at all, and not, as Meillassoux claims, if we don't have a causal order we wouldn't have a consciousness as if the first is the condition of the latter. This seems to be a negligible correction because after all Kant seems to still maintain that if we don't have a causal order we wouldn't have consciousness. And, indeed, Kant is saying that but not for the same reasons implied by Meillassoux, i.e. not because the disorder of phenomena would be such that any consciousness wouldn't be able to arise from such chaos. For Kant consciousness does not *arise from* a stable world but is the *counter part of* the stable world. The proposition, "we can't have a consciousness if we don't have a causal order" doesn't mean then that the latter is the condition of the former, but that when the transcendental subject conditions the thing-in-itself we necessarily have a consciousness *and* a causal order at the

⁴² Meillassoux, 89.

same time,⁴³ hence we can't have one without the other.⁴⁴ This nuance is crucial because it reveals the inconsistency of Meillassoux's interpretation: it is only if we suppose that consciousness arises from a stable order of nature that the fact of consciousness can stand as a proof that there is such a necessary order, i.e. a proof that the order is not changing. On the other hand, if consciousness *and* stability result from transcendental conditioning, the fact of consciousness can't stand anymore as a proof for some necessary order but just as a proof for transcendental conditioning. As to knowing if we do have a transcendental conditioning this question itself becomes absurd because there is a fact of consciousness *and* a fact of a causal order, and if we didn't have such a fact we would have absolutely nothing and wouldn't be even able to wonder about anything. If for Meillassoux then the proof is conditional for Kant the proof is absolute: either we have everything or nothing.⁴⁵

In the same line and considering the second argument, Meillassoux presents Hume's problem as if Hume's unbridled imagination forces Kant to postulate a

⁴³ "Now consciousness in time is necessarily combined with the consciousness of the possibility of this time-determination: Therefore it is also necessarily combined with the existence of the things outside me, as the condition of time-determination; i.e., the consciousness of my own existence is at the same time an immediate consciousness of the existence of other things outside me." Kant, *Critic of Pure Reason*, 327/B276.

⁴⁴ "Thus, our doctrine removes all reservations about assuming the existence of matter based on the testimony of our mere self-consciousness, and it declares this to be proved in the same way as the existence of myself as a thinking being. For I am indeed conscious to myself of my representations; thus these exist, and I myself, who has these representations. But now external objects (bodies) are merely appearances, hence also nothing other than a species of my representations, whose objects are something only through these representations, but are nothing separated from them. Thus external things exist as well as my self, and indeed both exist on the immediate testimony of my self-consciousness, only with this difference: the representation of my Self, as the thinking subject, is related merely to inner sense, but the representations that designate extended beings are also related to outer sense." Kant, 427/A371.

⁴⁵ We can join here two major problems in Kantian literature, that of the "Refutation of Idealism" and the "Objective Deduction of the Categories". I argue that only if we consider that transcendental conditioning operates prior to empirical consciousness and the causal order, by acting on the sensorial data can we have a stable world and a consciousness. In this sense we can understand why we can only have a consciousness if there is an objective external world, but also why the fact of consciousness proves that we do have an objective and stable external world. This solution for the "Refutation of Idealism" differs from the one exposed by Robison Daniel N. Robinson, 'Kant's (Seamless) Refutation of Idealism', *The Review of Metaphysics* 64, no. 2 (2010): 291–301..

necessary order of nature as a condition for there to be a consciousness and an unbridled imagination: we can only imagine contingent variations in a stable context but also, we can only have an imagination if we have a consciousness. While in fact Kant is saying that we can only have a stable order, consciousness *and* imagination as necessary consequences of the conditioning by the transcendental subject of the sensorial data. In fact, in many passages Kant shows that our creative imagination still conforms to possible experience because it still represents objects in space-time, objects which are substances, governed by an order or no order at all, having movement, etc. Indeed, the most extravagant scenes still comply with the form of experience even if the material of experience is borrowed from imagination, like when we imagine a substance that doesn't fill space, the intuition of the future or the intuition of other people's minds, and we can add the hieratic behavior of billiard balls.⁴⁶ Hence, Kant shows that we can detach the a priori categories of substance, community and causality and make them play outside of the boundaries of experience, but it remains that the phantasies engendered by this playful use will still conform to the form of experience or else we wouldn't even perceive imaginary pictures or recognize them as such. Thus, when Kant claims that possible experience is the ground even for imaginary thought experiments, he is not claiming that thought experiments are only possible if there is a consciousness and a stable context, but rather that however unbridled Hume's imagination can be it will still have to conform to the form of experience for us to be able to apprehend and look at its imaginary creations. Again, Meillassoux here makes the same mistake, instead of considering the possibility of our creative imagination as pertaining to the form of our imagination, he interprets that possibility as an actual possibility that allows us to be able to imagine.

⁴⁶ "But if one wanted to make entirely new concepts of substances, of forces, and of interactions from the material that perception offers us, without borrowing the example of their connection from experience itself, then one would end up with nothing but figments of the brain, for the possibility of which there would be no indications at all, since in their case one did not accept experience as instructress nor borrow these concepts from it." Kant, *Critic of Pure Reason*, 324/A222.

After clarifying the meaning of the mutual dependency of the causal order and consciousness on the transcendental conditioning, but that creative imagination is also a consequence of such conditioning, we can now tackle the Kantian solution for Hume's thought experiment as presenting a challenge to the order of nature. This solution consists in drawing a distinction between stability and objectivity. As we have seen, Meillassoux claims that in the Kantian system the frequent changes of the laws of nature will entail a destabilization of the phenomenal order and render consciousness and representation impossible⁴⁷. By that Meillassoux commits the second slippage in the interpretation of the Kantian solution to Hume's problem, that of identifying the causal order, or the stability of phenomena, with the laws of nature. Meillassoux attributes then to Kant the belief that the contingency of the laws of nature would lead to a frequent change in the phenomenal world, and Meillassoux does that in order to present his own thesis where the contingency of the laws of nature wouldn't imply a frequent change in the phenomenal order, and hence a destabilization of the order of appearances. This false attribution is itself grounded on another false attribution claiming that Kant believes that the contingency of the laws of nature is probabilistic. Kant would in that case think, about Hume's thought experiment, that if things can be otherwise it means that they could be governed by other laws of nature which are equally probable to the ones we *actually* have. Given that Kant abandoned dogmatism, i.e. the belief in an order existing in itself, it follows that he must admit that we must have an infinite number of possible sets of laws governing nature. Given that nothing guarantees why we have this set of laws rather than another, it follows that these laws can change, which would cause the disturbance of the stable order of phenomena. It remains that the fact of stability proves that only one set is being repeatedly drawn from the infinite number of possible sets, which pertains to a probabilistic miracle, and hence, Kant would conclude that the laws of nature must be necessary, and not probable, given such fact of stability. As Brassier puts it, Kant falsely infers from phenomenal stability

⁴⁷ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 106.

the necessity of the laws of nature⁴⁸. Meillassoux on the other hand draws a difference between probability and contingency by referring to Cantor's proofs establishing the impossibility to totalize the infinite.⁴⁹ If it is impossible to totalize the infinite possibilities pertaining to the laws of nature, it follows that these laws are contingent, i.e. without reason and having the possibility to be otherwise, without the need to consider them probable. In other words, it is because the totality of the contingent laws can't exist that we can't accurately say that the laws of nature are probable, and if the laws of nature are not probable it follows that there is no need to wonder why they are not changing, or why we always have the same set of laws, and then postulate that they must be necessary as Kant did, at least in Meillassoux's reading.⁵⁰

It is the resolution of Meillassoux to prove that the contingency of the laws of nature doesn't imply their frequent variation that motivates and misguides his reading of Kant. For Meillassoux, Kant considers that the contingency of the laws of nature will imply their frequent variation, leading to the actual variation of the phenomena, while, in our reading, Kant considers that the laws of nature are contingent and their variation depends on our conceptual rearrangements, hence it consists in an epistemological variation, i.e. a variation pertaining to the way we understand and explain the phenomena rather than a variation in itself⁵¹. Indeed, in strictly Kantian terms it is a non-sense to say "the laws of nature are changing", as if the laws of nature operate the change by themselves without our interference, given that in transcendentalism the laws of nature are purely rational constructs and hence they can only change if *we change* them. Hence the first error of Meillassoux is to claim that Kant believes that the contingency of

⁴⁸ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 79.

⁴⁹ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 103.

⁵⁰ Meillassoux, 106.

⁵¹ "This would be just like the first thoughts of Copernicus, who, when he did not make good progress in the explanation of the celestial motions if he assumed that the entire celestial host revolves around the observer, tried to see if he might not have greater success if he made the observer revolve and left the stars at rest." Kant, *Critic of Pure Reason*, 110 - BXVI.

the laws of nature would be ontological, in itself, rather than epistemological⁵². We can say then that for Meillassoux the laws of nature are identified as the reason for the stability of the phenomenal world, while for Kant phenomenal stability and the laws of nature are distinct, the first resulting from the general transcendental conditioning while the latter form the determination of such conditioning⁵³. We have then a three steps procedure in the determination of the laws of nature: first the general form of transcendental conditioning that forces us to apprehend the sense data as a stable experience, second we compare the sense data provided by such experience, and last we determine laws of nature expressing the stable rules and relations between the sense data.⁵⁴

This error is secured by another one, that of attributing to Kant the belief in some total sphere of the possible laws of nature, or even some totality of the conceivable. But Kant's notions of the distributive infinity and his notion of regulative Ideas, refute such belief in a closed infinite totality. Indeed, for Kant, as shown in the *First Conflict of the Transcendental Ideas*⁵⁵, we represent space or time *as infinite* but this doesn't mean that in themselves they are infinite, or that they are totalities. For Kant space appears infinite because all perceptions, in order to be perceived, require the transcendental form of spatial intuition, making all perceptions appear as belonging to space. It follows that even though all perceptions seem to belong to space it is impossible to totalize the synthesis, given that each part will be itself in space to be perceived, hence the impossibility of the concept of infinite totality⁵⁶. The same reasoning applies on the possibility

⁵² Hallward underlines this confusion in his essay, "Anything is Possible: A Reading of Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*" in Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*.

⁵³ Paul L. Franco, 'Are Kant's Concepts and Methodology Inconsistent with Scientific Change? Constitutivity and the Synthetic Method in Kant', *HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science* 2, no. 2 (2012): 321–53.

⁵⁴ Michael Friedman, 'Laws of Nature and Causal Necessity', *Kant-Studien* 105, no. 4 (1 January 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1515/kant-2014-0025>.

⁵⁵ Kant, *Critic of Pure Reason*, 471 - A427 / B455.

⁵⁶ "Now since this synthesis has to constitute a series that is never to be completed, one can never think a totality prior to it and thus also through it. For in this case the concept of the totality itself is the

of an infinite totality in time. It follows that for Kant the world is not some total infinity in any sense⁵⁷. If we object that this is not what Meillassoux means by the infinite totality of the laws of nature, that in the Kantian system the world could be an open or distributive infinity, and yet we have a total set of laws of nature governing this open infinity, we would reply that the only place where Kant would have alluded to such totality is when he referred to the Cosmological Idea. But, we know that in the Kantian system the Cosmological Ideas have only a regulatory role and should never be actually posited, i.e. they must stimulate the search for new causal chains, and the attempts to unify the different fields of science but shouldn't be postulated as existing totalities, as shown in the passage *On the empirical use of the regulative principle of reason in regard to all cosmological ideas*.⁵⁸ It is clear then that for Kant the notion of an infinite totality is not something that he would endorse,⁵⁹ neither as an infinite totality of the phenomenal world, nor as an infinite totality of all the possible laws of nature, a totality of the conceivable, or an Idea of Nature.⁶⁰ It follows that the laws of nature are not probable for Kant but they are necessary and contingent, i.e. they describe a necessary order and

representation of a completed synthesis of the parts, and this completion, hence also its concept, is impossible." Kant, 474 - A432 / B460.

⁵⁷ A. W. Moore, 'Aspects of the Infinite in Kant', *Mind* 97, no. 386 (1988): 205–23.

⁵⁸ "[...] and since the world of sense, however, contains nothing like that completeness, there can never again be an issue about the absolute magnitude of the series in this world, whether it might be bounded or in itself unbounded, but only about how far we should go back in the empirical regress when we trace experience back to its conditions, so that, following the rule of reason, we do not stop with any answer to its questions except that which is appropriate to the object. Kant, *Critic of Pure Reason*, 524 - A516 / B544.

⁵⁹ "In the logical estimation of magnitude, the impossibility of ever attaining to absolute totality through the progression of the measurement of the things of the sensible world in time and space was recognized as objective, i.e., as an impossibility of thinking the infinite as even given, and not as merely subjective, i.e., as an incapacity for grasping it; for there nothing at all turns on the degree of comprehension in one intuition as a measure, but everything comes down to a numerical concept." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 143.

⁶⁰ Kant states that no probability can be conceived regarding the supersensible because we can't form any totality of such supersensible world: "For probability is part of a certain series of grounds of possible certainty (the grounds of probability compare to the grounds of certainty as parts compare to a whole), in which the insufficient grounds of probability must be capable of being augmented." Kant, 329–30/ 5:466.

yet we can move from one necessary order to the other, as we will see.

ABSOLUTE CONTINGENCY

A last line of attack undertaken by Meillassoux on the Kantian system is the one claiming the reversal of our ignorance in relation to the thing-in-itself into a position of knowledge as to how things are in themselves. For Meillassoux, Kant has established that our knowledge is contingent and that the knowledge of the thing-in-itself is thus impossible: we only know nature in the way we organize it, i.e. nature appears such and such, but we can never know how it is in itself. Meillassoux inverts this position of ignorance by showing that if transcendentalism suspends the possibility of knowing the thing-in-itself, this position of ignorance points towards a positive knowledge, a grasp of how the thing is in itself.⁶¹ Speculative materialists consider that our ignorance as to how things are in themselves, meaning our incapacity to find reasons as to why and how things are such and such or why we have these transcendental structures and not others⁶², simply states that things are in themselves without reason and that they are hence absolutely contingent. Kantianism would then prepare the ground for the intellectual intuition of the being of beings, of how things are in themselves, because it proves that it is impossible for us to know the thing-in-itself.⁶³ We must underline here that we have two arguments, the first bearing on the contingency of our transcendental structures, and the second on the thing-in-itself. Meillassoux claims that if it is impossible to ground our transcendental structures and by that to justify them, it is not just because the provision of such proofs calls for the use of these structures leading to a circular argument, but because this impossibility gives us insight in the nature of the being in itself of these structures which is to be absolutely without ground.⁶⁴ More broadly, in the history of metaphysics, if reason is incapable of giving reasons as to the nature of reason and its origin, because of a similar circularity, such incapacity is not the

⁶¹ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 56.

⁶² Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 65.

⁶³ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 82.

⁶⁴ Meillassoux, 39.

sign of the finitude of reason but rather the positive intellectual intuition it has as to what reason is in itself, i.e. a being without reason, or a purely contingent being.⁶⁵ The same twist of reasoning applies to the world, where Meillassoux shows that if we can give reasons and describe objects *in* the world it remains that we can't give reasons or explain why we have a world, or why we have such a world, which proves that the being in itself of the world is to be absolutely contingent⁶⁶. Another object where we can intuit absolute contingency is the laws of nature, these laws give reason to a number of objects but themselves are without reason, and hence in our incapacity to give reason to the laws of nature we discover that we are intuiting the being in itself of these laws. The next step in Meillassoux's demonstration is to expand contingency from these privileged objects to all objects and beings: it is not only reason, the transcendental structures, the world or the laws of nature that are without reason, but all beings in their being are without reason.⁶⁷ Meillassoux here draws a distinction between being qua being, the thought of a being in its beingness, and the essence of a being. As beings, beings in their beingness are absolutely contingent and without reason, they are pure facts subjected to destruction, creation and change for no reason, but as to *what they are*, as to their constitutive properties and qualities we can confer upon them some rational justifications and relations: we can define a table to be such and such necessarily, but the fact that there is a table is absolutely contingent. The essence of beings is thus necessary while their existence is absolutely contingent.

The other line leading to absolute contingency doesn't dwell on some privileged objects that would reveal in their core the absolute lack of reasons, but rather addresses the being of beings as they are in themselves. Kantianism has not only shown that our transcendental structures are contingent, but also that the thing-in-itself is absolutely unknowable because of the contingency of our

⁶⁵ Assiter objects to all these arguments, including the argument of contingency of the laws of nature and that of the impossibility of making account of reason by reason. Alison Assiter, 'Speculative and Critical Realism', *Journal of Critical Realism* 12, no. 3 (1 July 2013): 283–300, <https://doi.org/10.1179/1476743013Z.0000000002>.

⁶⁶ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 33.

⁶⁷ Meillassoux, 53.

transcendental structures. Meillassoux's reversal here is to claim that if we prove that we don't know how, why or what the thing-in-itself is, we would have also proven that the thing-in-itself can always be otherwise of what we know and that it is without any reason. The Kantian position of ignorance as to the thing-in-itself means then that: 1) we can't give reasons that explain things as they are in themselves; 2) the thing-in-itself is a pure power of being other. Meillassoux concludes that the being in itself of all beings is that it is a *power to be other* that is without reason.⁶⁸

Here again we have a displacement of the Kantian system. While for Kant the thing-in-itself provides the *material* of knowledge and the transcendental structures provide the *forms* of knowledge in general, Meillassoux considers that the Kantian ignorance related to the thing-in-itself is an ignorance *of* knowledge. In fact, for Kant, knowledge is always the coupling of a form and a sensorial material and given that the thing-in-itself is neither it is simply outside the realm of knowledge and dwells in a sub-sensorial and sub-formal level, as a nothing that we need to presuppose in thought as constituting what becomes a material for knowledge. It follows that the *power to become other* is indeed the character of the sensorial material, while the thing-in-itself is characterized by a *power to become something*. The error of Meillassoux is again to ignore the status of the thing-in-itself as a nothing that can become something when we shape it's "produce" with the transcendental forms. While for Kant knowledge is about forms, and ignorance is about the incapacity to find a form for a given material, for Meillassoux the power to be other is instituted as a form of knowledge disregarding by that the distinction between forms and materials of knowledge and neglecting the difference between the sensorial material and the thing-in-itself. In that regards Kant remains a disciple of Plato and the Platonists that consider that the power to become other characterizes matter but can't stand as any form leading to valid knowledge.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Meillassoux, 62.

⁶⁹ "If, then, each thing is known by concept and thought, but in this case the concept states about matter what it does in fact state, that which wants to be a thought about it will not be a thought but a sort of

The limitation of knowledge to the forms applied on matter and the position of an unknowability of matter, because matter is precisely that which lacks form, is a classical position in the metaphysical tradition. Kant's innovation in relation to this tradition consists in showing that 1) the forms are immanent to the knowing subject, rather than existing in some transcendent realm to which we only have access via the intellect; 2) that the material is the sensorial given that can always receive different forms; 3) that the thing-in-itself is the residue that we need to presuppose as "existing" there after we subtract all the forms; 4) that this residue might have a structure of its own but that is absolutely foreign to our procedures and ways of knowing because our knowledge only grasps a *part* of it.⁷⁰ Hence it is only because we analytically know how our knowledge functions that we need to presuppose a thing-in-itself that is "other" than what we know. Meillassoux's confusion is complex and mixes then two levels: first he confuses the sensorial material with the thing-in-itself and attributes the power to become other to the thing-in-itself; second, he turns this pure power of becoming into a form while in the tradition such power is not a form and hence can't yield any proper knowledge.

Instead of dwelling on the difference between the thing-in-itself and the material of knowledge, Meillassoux's arguments focus on the impossibility to de-absolutize contingency.⁷¹ Meillassoux claims that, when it comes to the knowledge of the thing-in-itself, we have three major tendencies: 1) the dogmatist claiming that there is only one specific solution grounded on a necessary being of some sort; 2) the speculative materialist claiming that the being in itself of all beings is to be absolutely without reason, and hence a pure capacity-to-be-other; 3) the agnostic correlationist claiming that we don't know if we have a necessary

thoughtlessness; or rather the mental representation of it will be spurious and not genuine, compounded of an unreal part and with the diverse kind of reasoning. And it was perhaps because he observed this that Plato said that matter was apprehended by a "spurious reasoning." Plotinus, *Ennead II*, trans. A.H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), 127 - II.4.10.

⁷⁰ Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, Rev. and enl. ed (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2004), 51–57.

⁷¹ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 58.

rational determination of the thing-in-itself or that the thing-in-itself could be the capacity-to-be-other. Meillassoux claims that the agnostic correlationist is simply saying that the thing-in-itself could be other than a necessary order and that it could be other than the capacity-to-be-other, where by that he would be simply stating that the thing-in-itself could be otherwise and thus he would be doing exactly what speculative materialism is doing, i.e. having the intuition that the thing-in-itself can always be other. To say that the thing-in-itself could be other than the power to be other is simply to refer to the principle of factuality and then to re-institute the thing-in-itself as the power to be other. It is for this reason that the principle of factuality can't be de-absolutized, given that to de-absolutize it we will have to use it, hence re-institute it as absolute. But, in that regards Meillassoux would be only playing with words given that the capacity-to-be-other is a real possibility inherent to the sensorial material that can receive different forms and become other when subsumed by these forms, while the claim that the thing-in-itself "can be other" only expresses a formal possibility that results from the analysis of our procedures of knowing. In a Kantian perspective we need then to clearly distinguish the power to become other of the material of knowledge from the absolute otherness of the thing-in-itself: only the sensorial material can receive different forms and hence be really other, while Meillassoux commits a paralogism in his use of "capacity-to-be-other", once by making it qualify a real possibility, then by making it stand for a verbal expression.

As to the first argument, the one claiming that transcendentalism reveals the facticity of the transcendental structures, and that it is condemned to a descriptive approach that duplicates a transcendental realm from the empirical realm, we can reply as follow. If in the Kantian system the transcendental structures can't be apprehended as objects of knowledge without suffering a paralogism as to the use of these structure this doesn't mean that now they are completely arbitrary. Indeed, to reproach Kant that he is unable to *deduce* his transcendental categories and forms of sensibility but only to *describe* them is simply to ignore the empirical

realism of Kant⁷². We claim that Kantianism is an empiricism in so far as he tries to bring about the conditions of empirical experience by scrutinizing the empirical rather than speculating on its foundations. The Kantian approach consists in starting with a fact, the fact of science, of spatial objects, of geometry, of synthetical judgements a priori, etc. and then to question about the conditions of possibility of such facts by extracting the pure elements constituting such experience⁷³. The deduction for Kant has then a juridical meaning and not a speculative or logical meaning.⁷⁴ For example, it is a fact that our empirical experience is given in space and time, and the question then is to know how such a fact is possible, and what are space and time, rather than asking why we only have space and time as forms of sensibility and not some other forms.⁷⁵ In the *Transcendental Aesthetics* Kant provides demonstrations establishing the transcendental nature of space and time exhibiting his empirical approach that begins with a given fact and then strives to reach the conditions of such a fact. Kant shows that given that space and time can't be derived from experience nor function as concepts, it follows that they *must be* the transcendental forms of sensibility. Similarly, there is a fact of unity in our experience, and given that this unity can't be obtained from concepts nor from the diversity of the manifold given in space and time, it follows that there *must be* a unifying power, apperception,

⁷² "The transcendental idealist, on the contrary, can be an empirical realist, hence, as he is called, a dualist, i.e., he can concede the existence of matter without going beyond mere self-consciousness and assuming something more than the certainty of representations in me, hence the cogito, ergo sum." Kant, *Critic of Pure Reason*, 426/A370.

⁷³ "Further, these two faculties or capacities cannot exchange their functions. The understanding is not capable of intuiting anything, and the senses are not capable of thinking anything. Only from their unification can cognition arise. But on this account one must not mix up their roles, rather one has great cause to separate them carefully from each other and distinguish them. Hence we distinguish the science of the rules of sensibility in general, i.e., aesthetic, from the science of the rules of understanding in general, i.e., logic." Kant, 194 /B76-A52.

⁷⁴ "Jurists, when they speak of entitlements and claims, distinguish in a legal matter between the questions about what is lawful (quid juris) and that which concerns the fact (quid facti), and since they demand proof of both, they call the first, that which is to establish the entitlement or the legal claim, the deduction." Kant, 219/B116-117.

⁷⁵ Nour Soraya, 'The Legitimizing Fact in the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories: On Dieter Henrich's Reading of Kant', trans. Christian Klotz, *Kriterion: Revista de Filosofia* 3, no. Selected (2007): 0-0.

that constitutes the condition of possibility of the experience of unity. The interaction of apperception and space-time will then explain other facts, such as the possibility of synthetic judgements a priori, be it in mathematics or physics. Hence Kant's reasoning proceeds by elimination: if our experience provides us with features which are neither sensations nor concepts, and these features have the character of being universal, it follows that such features are not derived from experience nor from understanding, but belong to the form of experience and express the conditions allowing such experience to be possible. Kant approach is then an *analytic of experience*, it aims at isolating pure lineages, one lineage of forms, another of matter, and then to reveal their different mixtures. For Kant then experience as we know it is the mixture of the transcendental forms and the sensorial material, and this mixture results in our experiential knowledge. Now, if it is a fact that experience is contingent this contingency must rely on the necessary transcendental conditioning: indeed, the table could be destroyed or not, here or there, but it remains that this contingency itself relies on the possibility of experiencing in the first place, of having a spatial intuition, of considering that the table is a substance, etc. Similarly, objectivity is also contingent in so far as we can move from one objective system to the other, but whatever the objective system we are in this objective system will bear the stamp of the transcendental forms, i.e. it will have the form of possible experience. We see then that Kant distinguishes the necessary, the objective and the contingent. To have a contingent experience we need this experience to be necessarily conditioned by the transcendental conditions for it to be possible as such, and then we determine our experience with our empirical concepts to form an objective system connecting the different appearances of our experience in a rational construction.⁷⁶

While for Meillassoux, the impossibility for the transcendental to ground itself proves its contingency as constituting its necessary being in itself, for Kant the

⁷⁶ Seide Ansgar, 'How the Understanding Prescribes Form without Prescribing Content – Kant on Empirical Laws in the Second Analogy of Experience', *Kant Yearbook* 9, no. 1 (2017): 133, <https://doi.org/10.1515/kantyb-2017-0007>.

experience of contingency is grounded on the necessary conditioning of the transcendental forms. Indeed, we can only have the notion and the experience of something contingent if we have a priori necessary conditioning: I can only experience the facticity of reason or the laws of nature because I have an experience in the first place. The error of Meillassoux is here analogical to that of Hume, while Hume concludes from the contingency of the determination of the law to the contingency of the law,⁷⁷ Meillassoux concludes from the contingency of experience to the necessity of such contingency rather than concluding to the necessity of the conditioning that make possible the experience of contingency.

Hence the Kantian necessity is a necessary conditioning given the fact of experience, and not an absolute speculative necessity as the being it itself of experience. For Kant, the whole problem is to understand the fact of our empirical experience as it appears to us, and by that transcendentalism is an empiricism because it starts with experience to show its conditions of possibility. Meillassoux's critique would be then biased if it reproaches to Kant his descriptive method because Kant's empiricism doesn't allow him to speculate but forces him to remain as close as possible to experience by providing an analytic of that experience, an analytic that then must lead to these specific transcendental conditions. Hence, to claim that the transcendental conditions are purely contingent because we could have had other conditions misses the rigor Kant has in the extraction of his transcendental conditions. Hence, we shouldn't wonder about knowing why we have these conditions rather than others, but rather wonder why we have this experience rather than another. But, given that we can't know why we have this experience, it follows that we are bound to extract the conditions of this experience because it is the only experience we have: if we have

⁷⁷ "He therefore falsely inferred from the contingency of our determination in accordance with the law the contingency of the law itself, and he confused going beyond the concept of a thing to possible experience (which takes place a priori and constitutes the objective reality of the concept) with the synthesis of the objects of actual experience, which is of course always empirical." Kant, *Critic of Pure Reason*, 657/A766-B794.

this experience we must have these conditions. The necessity of the transcendental is then anchored in the fact that we have this experience and not another, hence the transcendental conditions are justified as derived from this experience and as constituting its necessary conditions. On the other hand, if Meillassoux asks *why we have this experience and not another* he would be asking a vain question and contradicting his own factual system given that Meillassoux shows that the only access to contingency as constituting the being of beings is the contingent fact itself.

Hence, Meillassoux and Kant begin with the fact of experience, but they differ as to how to understand this fact of experience. For Meillassoux experience is a necessary consequence of the principle of contingency, i.e. *there must be something rather than nothing* because the only necessity is that everything is without necessity, hence there must be contingent beings or else we wouldn't have contingency: if we have nothing we wouldn't have beings, and a fortiori contingent beings.⁷⁸ For Meillassoux then there must be something, and possibly an experience of beings if there are sentient beings, because contingency is necessary. Hence the reasoning of Meillassoux goes as follows: 1) the transcendental is contingent as he claims is proven in Kantianism; 2) contingency is the being in itself of the transcendental subject and of any being; 3) there must be beings to effectuate contingency. Kant on the other hand reasons as follows: 1) there is a fact of experience and being; 2) by analyzing this fact we get to necessary conditions that make this fact possible; 3) the conditions are immanent to the conditioned, i.e. to experience, because they are its form and not its reason of being. We see that only Kant is able to maintain the immanence of the principles to the fact of experience because the transcendental conditions are not the cause, or reason, of experience but rather its form. On the other hand, the immanence proposed by Meillassoux is flawed because, under the disguise of an inherence of contingency to contingent beings, it remains that contingency is the reason why and the necessary principle justifying the *existence* of beings and a

⁷⁸ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 76.

fortiori experience. While Kant never bypasses the fact of experience as the ultimate starting point of his system, Meillassoux makes a leap in reasoning showing that there is a principle justifying the fact of experience. Contrary to Meillassoux, Kant doesn't justify the *existence of experience* but shows that existence, reality, objectivity are all appearances belonging to experience. The accusation of facticity against Kant then can only hold if we consider that there must be a principle higher than experience that must justify experience or its existence, while for Kant experience remains the ultimate principle, not only for scientific knowledge, but also for philosophy whose task becomes that of clarifying how experience *as we know it* is possible, rather than finding a principle that could ground such experience. The immanence of Kantianism is more rigorous and powerful than that of Speculative Materialism because Kant's conditions are extracted from experience and return to experience as the form and material of experience, while Meillassoux's contingency is the *reason of* contingent beings, and hence has at least a logical priority over the contingent beings. If for Meillassoux we must have contingent beings because contingency is necessary and hence the ground justifying the existent of contingent beings, we can say that for Kant we must have the transcendental conditions, and have these conditions and not others, because experience is the ground of the transcendental analytic, but also these conditions will only exist as inherent to this experience.

CONCLUSION: CONFRONTATION BETWEEN CORRELATIONISM AND SUPER-CORRELATIONISM

In this essay I have tried to show that if Speculative Materialism is able to overcome Kantianism it is only by distorting it into a weaker version of correlationism. It is in this regard that I developed Super-Correlationism as a reading of Kantianism that I believe is closer to the letter of the Kantian texts and that is much more difficult to overcome. Indeed, if we consider that the primordial correlation is not between consciousness and the world, but rather between the transcendental subject and the thing-in-itself, and that this primordial correlation leads to the manifestation where consciousness faces the

world, the speculative arguments collapse. In the following table I have collected the major statements constituting the two versions of Kantianism, Correlationism being the Speculative Materialist version of Kant, while Super-Correlationism is the version I am proposing in the spirit of the Kantian letter.

Correlationism	Super-Correlationism
<p>Possible experience is the possibility for a subject to actually experience some object.</p> <p>Transcendental conditioning is only possible if there is a subject co-present to the object and hence representation and manifestation are limited to the existence of the knowing subject.</p>	<p>Possible experience is the form of experience conveyed by the subject to the sensorial material of the thing-in-itself.</p> <p>Transcendental conditioning correlates the subject to the sensorial material producing a representation whose content can span way beyond the time of the correlation and manifestation.</p>
<p>Objectivity consists in actually having the objective properties described by truthful statements ascribed to the object. Hence, we need the presence of the subject to confer the transcendental features to the object.</p>	<p>Objectivity is the form given by the transcendental subject to the sensorial material, thus a way of appearing of the sensorial data. Hence, we don't need the presence of the subject to confer the transcendental features to all the objects.</p>
<p>There must be a given actual stability that allows the synthesis of appearances into objects. Actual stability is the ground for conceptual objectivity. Objectivity only represents the given stability.</p>	<p>The a priori dynamic laws confer conceptual objectivity to the appearances by virtue of a conceptual double bind. Conceptual objectivity is the ground for actual stability. Stability determines itself into an objective order.</p>
<p>"We can't have a consciousness without a causal order" means that the causal order is the condition of consciousness. The fact of consciousness is a proof for the existence of a necessary causal order.</p>	<p>"We can't have a consciousness without a causal order" means that the transcendental conditioning of the thing-in-itself necessarily leads to a causal order <i>and</i> a consciousness, which are only the proofs of the transcendental conditioning.</p>

<p>“We can’t have imaginary scenarios without a possible experience” means that an actual necessary order and consciousness must exist for us have an unbridled imagination.</p>	<p>“We can’t have imaginary scenarios without possible experience” means that even an unbridled imagination will conform with the forms of possible experience, while its material is imaginary.</p>
<p>The change of the laws of nature will entail a destabilization of the phenomenal order. The variation of the laws of nature is ontological.</p>	<p>It is because the knowing subject can change the laws of nature as the determinations of stability that we will always have a stable phenomenal order. The variation of the laws of nature is epistemological.</p>
<p>Our ignorance as to the thing-in-itself is an ignorance of knowledge. The power to be other is the form of the thing-in-itself, hence we can reverse our ignorance in a knowledge and transcendentalism into Speculative Materialism. “The power to be other” means that the thing-in-itself is in itself this power, hence it has this specific form that “it can be other”.</p>	<p>Our ignorance as to the thing-in-itself is an ignorance because the thing-in-itself is the methodological and epistemological residue of the way we know the procedures of our discursive knowledge. The power to be other is the character of the sensorial material, and hence it can’t be a knowledge about it nor about the thing-in-itself, and thus we can’t reverse transcendentalism into Speculative Materialism.</p>
<p>Transcendentalism can only describe his categories as copied from experience hence these categories are contingent and can be otherwise. Speculative Materialism concludes from the contingency of experience to the necessity of such contingency.</p>	<p>Transcendentalism is an analytic of experience showing the necessary conditions of our contingent experience. Transcendentalism shows that if we have this experience we need these conditions and doesn’t wonder about why we don’t have other conditions, or another experience.</p>

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