REFLECTIONS OF AN IMAGINARY OBJECT ON A SILURIAN LAKE GREGG LAMBERT

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Recently, I have been reading Lucretius's great poem *De rerum natura*. At the same time, I have been reflecting on my own coming death. Of course, these two activities naturally go together, since Lucretius himself wrote the poem, basically, as an argument concerning why we should not fear death, or rather, why the fear of death is the cause of the greatest amount of suffering and illusions in life, especially the illusion of a god. According to Lucretius, fear of death is a projection of terrors experienced in life, of pain that only a living (intact) mind can feel. Being completely devoid of sensation and thought, a dead person cannot miss being alive. Therefore, as a consoling gesture, Lucretius also puts forward the 'symmetry argument' against the fear of death. In it, he says that people who fear the prospect of eternal non-existence after death should think back to the eternity of non-existence before their birth, which didn't cause them much suffering.

Upon further reflection, it suddenly occurred to me that this may be one way of understanding what is partly a psychological motive for the 'problem of ancestrality' in the recent argument by Quentin Meillassoux. It has been little more than ten years ago that he first put us on the track of the arche-fossil as a 'hidden path' that will lead a temporality prior to consciousness and of life itself, in order 'to get rid of ourselves', which is to say, to get rid of the necessity of the subject entirely as the true cause of all our suffering, a suffering that has grown to encompass the earth, if not the universe. I thought to myself: might this not be a contemporary version of Lucretian materialism that admonishes us to reflect on the eternity of non-existence before the advent of our species?

No doubt, Meillassoux would not disagree that the material universe he describes bears some implicit kinship with the Lucretian universe, the contemplation of which, in a certain sense, was also fashioned as a manner of 'getting rid of ourselves' (i.e. getting rid of the Subject, albeit in Lucretius is a much more poetical fashion than merely discoursing "about a past in which both humanity and life are absent").¹ Nevertheless, he would surely object to any implicit 'subjectivist' account of his motive: the fear of death, *the absence of the Ego*. Here, in reformulating Meillassoux's speculative hypothesis, I am substituting the 'Ego' as the position of reflective (or thetic) consciousness that is declared to be 'absent' in the grasping of the ancestral realm. No doubt, at this point he would accuse me of importing a foreign and, moreover, blatantly psychoanalytic concept into the analysis, which threatens to spoil the purely objective illusion of the ancestral realm.

Nevertheless, I do think there has been a great deal of unnecessary confusion lately between the subject and the ego around the place

1 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. by Ray Brassier, Pbk. ed (London: Continuum, 2009), 27.

of consciousness, since psychoanalysis has shown that it is precisely that the function of a subject occurs in the absence of consciousness of the Ego. From a rigorous psychoanalytic perspective, it is the reality of the symbolic order that has effectively reduced the necessity of consciousness, which is why the consciousness is not altogether absent, but according to Lacan's famous formulation, 'decentered' in relation to the world of symbolic calculation. For example, in the case of mathematical symbols, or algebraic calculations, which is to say the order of machines that function without the need of anything like empirical or individual consciousness, this has something to do with the production of an absence necessary for the machines to function on their own, as *automata*.

To illustrate this, let me turn to a similar (if not identical) speculative hypothesis that Lacan employed very early on to demonstrate a similar claim that Meillassoux will make fifty years later with the example of the arche-fossil; although, he will draw very different conclusions concerning the significance of the phenomena of consciousness as such. "Suppose all men to have disappeared from the world," he begins, then immediately adds the following rejoinder, speaking mostly to the philosophers who are in attendance: "I say men on account of the high value which men attribute to consciousness."² Moreover, "let us take it to the point where all living beings have disappeared and there are only waterfalls and springs left—lightning and thunder too." It is at this point, in the splendour of this post-Anthropocene world, as you might have suspected, Lacan posits the existence of an object mirrored in a lake—"once again, we are dealing with a mirror"—and asks: "The image in the mirror, the image in the lake, do they still exist?"³

Of course, they do! he immediately exclaims, since the rays that return to the mirror cause us to locate in a purely virtual space an object that supposedly exists in reality; however, the real object is not the object you see in reality. *Voilà!* "So here we have the phenomenon of consciousness as such."⁴ Therefore, let us also recognize that the order of the mirror has evolved into the order of the machine at the high point of our civilization, so that we can imagine instruments sufficiently complicated enough to go on recording images in the lake despite the fact that all living beings have disappeared. So, according to what Lacan identifies as "a purely materialist definition" (recalling at this point the material universe of Lucretius as well), this is also a phenomenon of consciousness as such, though phenomena might not be the right word

2 Jacques Lacan, *Seminar II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, bk. 2, trans. S. Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 48.

3 Ibid., 48.

4 Ibid., 46.

since it won't have been perceived by any ego-like experience, or "any kind of ego or consciousness, the ego being absent at the time."⁵

Here we might get a glimpse of a certain 'correlation' with Meillassoux's example of the arche-fossil. According to Meillassoux's speculative hypothesis, the arche-fossil functions exactly like an object in a mirror, or like a reflection of a mountain upon a Silurian lake, since it contains or presents an image of an entity that is in-itself, given that there is no ego posited to apprehend its image. This is presented as the entire paradox of ancestralism: 'how can a being manifest being's anteriority to manifestation?' Of course, this question already presupposes that what we call manifestation occurs in the shadow of the presence of an Ego, a Subject, whatever you want to call the being anterior to manifestness as such. In other words, as Meillassoux asks:

How are we to think the meaning of a discourse which construes the relation to the world—that of thinking and/or living—as a fact inscribed in a temporality within which this relation is just one event among others, inscribed in an order of succession in which it is merely a stage, rather than an origin? How is science able to think such statements, what and in what sense can we eventually ascribe truth to them?⁶

Reflecting on this last question, it occurs to me that before you can gain access to the ancestral realm, you must find some way to cause the present world to disappear, which in the above passage is accomplished by appealing to the existence of real numbers on a line of quantitative duration, on the basis of which we can have little machines called thermonuclear clocks that function without the shadow of any ego-like experience. Nevertheless as the mathematician Julien Pacotte has observed, "any measure bears within its own principle a kind of vicious circle."⁷ For example, contemporary science is in a position to precisely determine—albeit in the form of revisable empirical hypotheses—the dates of the formation of the fossils of creatures living prior to the emergence of the first hominoids, the genre of life between different extinction events, the date of the accretion of the earth, the date of the formation of stars, and even the 'age' of the universe in approximate real numbers. "For what is at stake here," Meillassoux posits, "is the nature of scientific discourse, and more particularly of what characterizes this discourse—i.e. its mathematical form."⁸ Thus, "we shall therefore maintain the following: all those aspects of the object that can be formulated in mathematical terms can be meaningfully conceived as properties of the object in itself."⁹

5 Ibid., 47.

6 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 10.

7 Pacotte, *La physique théorique nouvelle*, (Paris: Gauthier-Villars et Cie, 1921), 99.

8 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 26

9 Ibid., 3.

Nevertheless, in response to the above claim, we could easily propose from the perspective of a machinic universe, such as a posthumous perspective of a race of machines, as in a science fiction, that the basic paradox of what Meillassoux calls ‘correlationism’ is still present; although, it is simply displaced onto the universe of machines, or more accurately, the continual progress of a theoretical mathematics at a quantum level of measurement. Secondly, recently the astrophysicist Adam Frank and NASA’s Goddard Institute director Gavin Schmidt addressed a number of misconceptions about studying the past. One of the first things they discuss is the fossil record. We’ve all seen the remains of ancient creatures on display, but these specimens represent only a tiny sliver of life on Earth. “Organisms only fossilize under very specific conditions. An extinct species could have numbered in the millions, and maybe none of them fossilized.”¹⁰

Returning to Meillassoux’s own description, although ancestry is a temporal notion, “its definition does not invoke distance in time, but rather anteriority in time.” This is why the arche-fossil does not merely refer to an un-witnessed occurrence, but to what he calls a non-given occurrence—“ancestral reality does not refer to occurrences which a lacunary givenness cannot apprehend [like the inverse side of a cube], but to occurrences which are not contemporaneous with any givenness, whether lacunary or not [thus, negating any extrapolation or geometrical calculation as well].” At one point in the argument, moreover, Meillassoux strips the arche-fossil of extension as well, as if its being has been reduced to the purely punctiform event of facticity, that is, to a date or a pure number. Since it has been stripped a priori of all secondary qualities—those that would arrive precipitously in correlation to a subject—the arche-fossil has neither any relation to a ‘life-world’ (as phenomenologists like to say after Husserl), nor even to any ancestral present, and thus no form of self affection, *no symbol of its own genesis*, since it is reduced to simple qualities; that is to say, “all those aspects of the object that can give rise to a mathematical thought and thus can be meaningfully turned into properties of the thing not only as it is with me, but also as it is without me.”¹¹

Concerning Meillassoux’s claim, therefore, one question that would concern us is whether the manifestation of the primordial time of anteriority would even be possible as “[...] a deeper level of temporality, with which what came before the relation-to-the-world is itself

10 Ryan Witwam, ‘Silurian Hypothesis: What If Humans Aren’t the First Civilization on Earth?’ Accessed on April 19, 2018 at 1:01 pm <https://www.extremetech.com/extreme/267855-silurian-hypothesis-what-if-humans-arent-the-first-civilization-on-earth>

11 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 123.

but a modality of that relation-to-the-world.”¹² But what is this deeper temporality? Under what form of ‘manifestness’ does it appear (and for whom)? Certainly not the arche-fossil itself, which is denied all extension and thus could not even be qualified as a phenomenon, but merely the trace of a non-existent object of consciousness. And, finally, why ‘deeper’? Does this not simply mean more ‘significant’, ‘eventful’, ‘meaningful’ for the subject of the statement, that is to say, the subject of speculative realism for whom the pure and simple ‘fact’ of the anteriority of the arche-fossil is a singular and ‘critically potent’ event for all philosophical speculation afterwards. In other words, in the temporality announced by the major statement of speculative realism, we can find a strict grammatical correlation drawn between subject and object, but the temporality of this correlation does not refer to the past for its ancestral significance (which is simply a ‘before’), but rather to the future that is manifested as the statement’s own singular, eventful, and critical potency in the contemporary time of philosophy.

¹² Ibid., 123.