



## You Can't Handle the Truth

*Jeremy Kessler*

The advance of modern science holds out the prospect of explaining everything, from the motion of the stars to our daily moral decision-making, in purely physical and therefore (it is assumed) rational terms. As the evolutionary psychologist Henry Plotkin, sounding one part weary schoolmaster and one part wild-eyed prophet, writes in his 2000 book *Evolution in Mind*, "All things are physical things and nothing else.... There is no mysterious, ineffable, undefinable, untouchable, or unmeasurable force or property of life beyond a very complex organization of chemicals which is best described by the laws of chemistry and physics." Many scientists are quick to point out, however, that simply to assume that reality is fully explicable in physical terms is itself unscientific. Declarations such as Plotkin's resemble the dogmatic metaphysics of pre-modern times, when basic truths about the universe were taken to be either self-evident or known through faith. But what if one could prove—definitively, rationally prove—that all that exists, all that there ever was or will be, are the

mute chemical reactions that Plotkin describes?

In his debut book *After Finitude*, French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux seeks to provide such a proof. He explains that errors within philosophy have falsely made us doubt that the world is only matter, and given us the misbelief that we must always allow for the possibility of there being some mysterious supplement to scientific truth. Meillassoux locates just where and when philosophy surrendered to this shyness—namely, with the work of Immanuel Kant—and claims to disinter the discipline and place it on surer ground, amenable to an absolutely materialist, rationalist worldview.

That Kant is the *bête noire* of such a self-styled rationalist is at first surprising. Kant, the standard-bearer of the Enlightenment, was a great lover of Isaac Newton and a staunch defender of scientific progress. Indeed, he aimed to develop a moral philosophy that did for the notions of right and wrong what Newton had done for fast and slow and Copernicus for night and day. Yet Kant felt that we could never

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be sure that scientific truth was the universe's last word.

According to Meillassoux, Kant rejected the possibility of our having *absolute* knowledge—knowledge that is true eternally and necessarily. As a consolation, Kant allowed that we could have *universal* knowledge—truths that are valid for all of us human beings. In Meillassoux's gloss, Kant attached the qualifier "for us" to every truth-statement that people make. So instead of saying, "it is absolutely true that these shoes are made out of atoms," we must say, "it is true for us that these shoes are made out of atoms." While we can't know that something is absolutely true, we can know that something is true from our point of view.

One hundred fifty years before Kant's turn from absolute truth to "for us" truth, Descartes had also tried to root certainty in the human subject. Famously, Descartes argued that, even in the process of doubting the existence of anything at all, I prove that something does exist: my thought—the fact that I am doubting. Starting with this first principle, the existence of his thought, Descartes built an entire scientific worldview, which included the existence of matter and the validity of our mathematical descriptions of it. But Descartes' system depended on more than later philosophers thought one could rationally accept—including the existence of a benevolent God as the first cause of the universe. As

a result, Meillassoux explains, Kant developed a more humble system, in which we can make true statements about the world, but must always keep in mind that they are true only for us. Kant's "for us" limitation rejected our ability to know either the ultimate reason for the existence of the universe or absolute truths about it.

While Meillassoux agrees with Kant that we cannot know the ultimate reason behind the universe, he argues that Kant's "for us" limitation goes too far, barring us from being committed to the absolute truths that science purports to produce. "Absolute" here means "absolutely independent of the human perspective": claims about events that occurred prior to human consciousness—for instance, claims about the Big Bang or the formation of a star billions of years ago—are vitiated by the "for us" limitation, because science claims them to be true not "for us" but true precisely in our absence. There was no "us" when some particular star exploded—and yet it is absolutely true *that* it exploded. And if "we"—every human mind—blink out of existence tomorrow, the stars will continue to wheel in the night sky, as truthfully and absolutely so as ever.

According to Meillassoux, the bread and butter of science is to make just such absolute claims about events and conditions that happen despite our presence in the world. He calls such claims "ancestral statements,"

because they refer to a reality prior to our existence. If we cannot make ancestral statements—if every time we try to say “this happened,” we have to append the clause, “as far as we’re concerned”—then science is just a game that we play amongst ourselves.

Just such a conclusion—that science is a game—was reached by some late twentieth-century thinkers, who argued that scientific facts have no particular relation to an objective world beyond human language. The physicist Alan Sokal famously satirized this way of thinking when he penned a fake article offering a “hermeneutic” analysis of quantum gravity and got it accepted by a leading journal of postmodern thought, *Social Text*, in 1996. Many argue that Sokal won the “science wars” of the 1990s when he embarrassed the *Social Text* crowd. But without a proof of the absolute objectivity of scientific truth, we are only in the midst of a long ceasefire. Meillassoux wishes to win the war once and for all, achieving Descartes’ degree of mathematical certainty about the world outside, but without Descartes’ metaphysical assumptions.

The grand goal of Meillassoux’s undertaking is to prove that we can know truths about the world that are independent of human consciousness. In the last chapter of *After Finitude*, he describes this grand goal in terms of a millennial struggle

between two opposing visions of man’s place in the universe. On one side is modern science, the true child of the Copernican Revolution. While his astronomical predecessor, Ptolemy, thought that the sun revolved around the earth, Copernicus contended that the earth revolved around the sun. On the other side, according to Meillassoux, is post-Kantian philosophy. Kant famously declared that his philosophy inaugurated a new Copernican Revolution. But as many commentators, including Meillassoux, have noted, Kant’s insistence that truth can only ever be mind-dependent—true “for us” but not true absolutely—ironically put man back in the center of the universe, where Ptolemy had originally placed him.

Meillassoux dedicates *After Finitude* to combating the “contemporary Ptolemaism” that insists that truth depends on the human perspective. He writes that “if empirical science is actually possible... this is on account of the actual stability of the laws of nature. But... this stability must be established as a mind-independent fact if we want to achieve a decisive break with contemporary Ptolemaism.” Only if we can know how the world is in the absence of the human mind, Meillassoux contends, can we take seriously the claims that science makes about an objective, physical world.

For Meillassoux, mortality is the great symbol of such absolutely

objective truth, because to think of the possibility of our own deaths is to think of a world bereft of human consciousness. And, as Meillassoux argues, mortality is just what Ptolemaic thinking must deny, as the “for us” limitation on truth leads irrevocably to a commitment to immortality. If we accept the limitation of the “for us,” Meillassoux reasons, then we cannot reasonably believe in a world that is independent of our consciousnesses. With what proposition would we speak of this world not-for-us? “There is a reality independent of us (for us, that is)?” But if there is nothing beyond my consciousness, then its ceasing to exist is meaningless. If my existence is only ever true for me, then it is a logical contradiction to say that I cease to exist, because such a statement could only also be said to be true “for me.” I cease to exist (from the standpoint of my continuing to exist). In order to accept the truth of mortality, we must admit that our thinking the possibility of our death accesses a truth independent of our existence. As Meillassoux writes, “If my ceasing to be depended upon my continuing to be so that I could keep thinking myself as not being, then I would continue to agonize indefinitely, without ever actually passing away.”

This is the “for us” thinker’s “proof” of the immortality of consciousness, and Meillassoux accepts its reasoning, given its premises. But such

a view, Meillassoux replies, should outrage the modern scientific imagination, which he believes is a resolutely materialist one. Evolution tells us that human beings have only been around for a brief time. And the law of entropy tells us that our staying power is limited. If inter- or intra-species competition doesn’t destroy us first, a dying star will.

Meillassoux insists that if you think modern science is a meaningful endeavor, then you must reject “for us” thinking entirely, and embrace the fact that what science tells us about the physical foundations of the universe is absolutely—and exhaustively—true. No room for mystery, just for chemicals.

If Meillassoux’s book ended here, then we would be simply left with a stalemate. The “for us” thinkers, whom Meillassoux calls “agnostics,” would go one way and the scientific absolutists would go the other, each group clinging to its own premises. But Meillassoux wants to go further. Even if “for us” thinking (and its supposed recipe for immortality) offends Meillassoux, can he actually prove it wrong—prove that there is something internally contradictory about “for us” thinking? Meillassoux thinks he can.

Meillassoux’s strategy is to show that acceptance of the “for us” limitation, which supposedly forestalls knowledge about the universe independent of human

consciousness, actually *entails* such absolute knowledge. He reasons in the following way: If I, as a “for us” thinker, believe that it is reasonable to say, “For all I know, these shoes might not be made of atoms but of something entirely different, or maybe they are not ultimately shoes at all,” then I must believe that I know one thing absolutely: that each thing could be otherwise. Because the agnostics foreclose the possibility of knowing what a thing is “in-itself” or absolutely, independently of our perspective, they must affirm that there *is* such a difference, affirm that there is a world beyond the “for us.” The agnostic thus admits, unwittingly, that he *can* think something not for-himself but absolutely. Behind whatever the world is “for the agnostic” lurks the absolute truth that that world might be otherwise, not for himself. This absolute knowledge of each thing’s capacity to be otherwise—something else or nothing at all—is what Meillassoux calls “the principle of unreason.”

The principle of unreason means, as the subtitle of Meillassoux’s book announces, the “necessity of contingency”: the absolute truth that nothing is eternal, that everything can transform or perish, even the human perspective. But in order for the principle of unreason to be true, Meillassoux continues, there must always be *something* beyond the “for us” perspective. In order to remain persistently agnostic about what lies

beyond his consciousness, the rational “for us” thinker must commit to an absolute truth: that there is a world beyond his merely contingent thought. Starting from the premise of the “for us” thinker, Meillassoux thus gradually begins to work his way back toward the absolute—what he calls “the great outdoors,” the world beyond human perspective.

This great outdoors is the world that Galileo, following upon the work of Copernicus, discovered, and which Descartes elaborated. Galileo, Meillassoux explains, submitted the entire world for the first time to mathematical description. In doing so, he revealed a universe, as Meillassoux describes it, “wherein bodies as well as their movements can be described independently of their sensible qualities, such as flavor, smell, heat, etc.” Only when this “glacial world” was revealed—a world “capable of subsisting without any of those aspects that constitute its concreteness for us”—could the Copernican Revolution, the displacement of man from the center of the universe, be fully accomplished.

Yet, in addition to the mathematical reality of the world, Descartes believed that there had to be an ultimate reason that explained why the “glacial world” was necessarily the way he found it. Consequently, he tried to prove that the ultimate reason for the world’s structure was a benevolent God. The world’s structure was absolutely necessary and

reasonable because God had willed it as such.

But a century after Descartes wrote, David Hume argued that we can *never* rationally know the ultimate causes of natural events. Science can tell us, perhaps, that A causes B, and B causes C, but, Hume explained, it will not be able disclose what caused *n*—the very first cause that led to C. Hume wrote in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) that “as to the cause of these general causes, we should in vain attempt their discovery.... These ultimate springs and principles are totally shut up from human curiosity and enquiry.”

Kant agreed with Hume. Yet, Meillassoux notes ruefully, the inability of science to tell these men the ultimate reason behind the world did not lead either of them to abandon the thought that there *had to be* an ultimate reason. Without access to such an ultimate explanation for why things are the way they are, both men felt they had to radically scale back Descartes’ claims about what we can know. After Hume, the failure to provide an ultimate reason for the way things are came to be understood as a call for epistemic humility—for the abandonment of the possibility of absolute truth of any sort, not just the true ultimate reason or first cause.

Meillassoux believes that he has freed us, finally, from the lingering metaphysical doubt of Hume and Kant. Beginning with the skeptical

premise of the “for us” thinker, he has derived the “principle of unreason,” the fact that there is no reason why things are one way rather than another—that the only necessity is contingency. Having gotten the monkey of necessity off our backs, we can now embrace the absoluteness of mathematics, and the reality of the glacial world it describes, untroubled by that world’s lack of metaphysical foundations.

Having shown that “for us” thinking reveals an absolute reality operating beyond the skepticism of modern science, however, Meillassoux seems to have cost modern science too much. Doesn’t the principle of unreason undermine the physical regularities that science purports to demonstrate just as much as it undermines the confident skepticism of the “for us” thinker? If there is no ultimate reason why things are the way they are, then why isn’t everything simply a chaotic morass? Meillassoux explains that these questions confuse the *stability* of the natural world with its *necessity*. Just because the world is totally contingent, just because there is no ultimate reason that it is the way it is, does not mean that we should expect it to be unstable, does not mean that we can’t rely on our best science. True, Meillassoux admits, it is possible that at any moment everything in the world could change shape. But until this near-miracle occurs, we

can keep doing science with absolute confidence. Each person has only one life to live, and science has only one reality to explore: reality as described by—and reducible to—mathematics.

In the end, however, Meillassoux's commitment to philosophical acrobatics may be unavailing. After all of *After Finitude's* ins and outs, the inescapability of the human perspective remains. Even Meillassoux's rejection of the bugaboo of metaphysical necessity depends upon the "for us" perspective. He reveals within that perspective a hidden, absolute commitment: the commitment to the contingency of the human world, and to a greater reality beyond it, knowable in absolute terms. But this absolute commitment still is a human one. Meillassoux's chain of reasoning, even if one accepts all of its premises, is a human artifact, and cannot claim any verification greater than the kind that people provide.

Like his teacher Alain Badiou, Meillassoux puts great stock in set theory and modern notions of infinity as methods for unearthing truths that exceed human contingency. But do these methods have any existence independent of the human minds that engage in them? Even within mathematics, something like the Ptolemaic-Copernican divide persists. While some mathematicians believe that their work uncovers absolute, mind-independent truths about the nature of reality, others believe that they are simply exploring what people can

do with their remarkable equipment. Meillassoux himself admits that he is far from properly "absolutizing" the kind of mathematical reasoning on which he depends. For the modern-day Copernicans to win, Meillassoux announces, they must be able to show that "every mathematical statement" is "capable of existing in a world devoid of humanity." Such a victory must necessarily wait for a humanless world. Until then, we are stuck with the world "for us."

Does the inescapability of perspective mean that scientific truth is an illusion or a parlor-trick, as Meillassoux claims it must? No. All of the fMRI scans, the particle accelerations, the telescopic observations, and the new medicines and technologies that our species produces are unquestionably real. But for now, at least, we have no way of saying they are real in some way that is independent of our experience of them. What's really real—what we envision as being before us and above us and beyond us—is forever up for debate precisely because we cannot prove by ourselves what is beyond ourselves. This debate simply cannot be resolved by formulae or experiments—things we create and do.

Because it does not admit of outside confirmation, the really real is the most peculiarly human of things. In reaching for what is farthest from us, we remind ourselves that we are still here, still reaching. For this reason, the really real remains the proper

subject of philosophy. Such a philosophy need not conflict with what Meillassoux sees as the Copernican mandate. A scientifically-described material world in which human beings occupy a passing, peripheral place is one candidate for really-real status. People like Meillassoux clearly feel that such a description of the universe is the key to understanding

life on earth. Others have other keys, other candidates. But this question of the really real can never be finally settled. Or if it can, that which is finite in us will never know the answer.

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