

Whatever happened to reality?

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Iâ??m reading *After Finitude* by Quentin Meillassoux, with a view to bringing the thinking of the pragmatic philosopher C.S. Peirce (1839-1914) up to date â?? or at least, this is an opportunity to compare and contrast Peirceâ??s pragmatic realism with some thinking now about reality (100 years later).

Meillassouxâ??s contention is that the so-called linguistic turn in philosophy canâ??t keep up with advances in science â?? the explosion of knowledge and data, and the vastness of time and space with which it deals. Meillassoux is opposed to the view that everything known and knowable about the universe is mediated and constructed by human intellect â?? in language. This latter anthropocentrism he labels â??correlationism.â?•

> â??By â??correlationâ?? we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the otherâ?• (5).

The great outdoors

Meillassoux wants to allow the possibility of thinking and talking about a reality that doesnâ??t depend on us humans. As correlationists, this is what we have given up:

> â??For it could be that contemporary philosophers have lost the *great outdoors*, the *absolute* outside of pre-critical thinkers: that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not; that outside which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory â?? of being entirely elsewhereâ?• (7).

I think the trick is to develop such a philosophy without resorting to old-fashioned *naÃ¯ve realism*. I tackled *naÃ¯ve realism* in the context of claims people were making about virtual reality back in the 1990s. Meillassoux thinks that â??every philosophy which disavows naÃ¯ve realism has become a variant of correlationismâ?• (5). That means that the following excerpt from my book

Technoromanticism: Digital Narrative, Holism, and the Romance of the Real would be construed by Meillassoux as â??correlationist,â?• though Iâ??m not sure Iâ??m ready to give that up yet.



Pragmatically real

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Excerpt from Coyne, Richard. 1999. *Technoromanticism: Digital Narrative, Holism, and the Romance of the Real*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, pp 113-115.

Language features prominently in narratives of the real. Sociologist Peter Winch takes the pragmatic view of language, specifically that of the later Wittgenstein, to construct a pragmatic view of cognition and community. He provides the example of G. E. Mooreâ??s informal â??proof of the external worldâ?•: â??He held up each of his hands in succession, saying, â??Here is one hand and here is another; therefore at least two external objects exist; therefore the external world existsâ??â?• (3). But according to Winch, Moore was not so much enacting an experiment as: â??*reminding* his audience of the way in which the expression â??external objectâ?? is in fact used. And his reminder indicated that the issue in philosophy is not to prove or disprove the existence of a world of external objects but rather to *elucidate the concept* of externalityâ?• (10).

Winchâ??s view captures the tenor of pragmatism, that we *use* words. Words have currency and use value. They *make* things so by the utterance of them. To appeal to external objects (the real world and an independent reality) through statements in language, *makes* those entities, not for all time in a metaphysical sense, but for a purpose and in a context of use. In other words, the real is contingent. This is not to separate language from the world, as if there is a real world imperfectly understood, and language that makes the world for us. The strong point of pragmatism is that language *is* our world, including the concept of reality itself.

This pragmatic narrative may appear familiar. It seems to accord with aspects of positivist views of language as expounded by the early Wittgenstein, but it goes beyond positivism. According to the later (post-positivist) Wittgenstein:

> â??We cannot say . . . that the problems of philosophy arise out of language *rather than* out of the world, because in discussing language philosophically we are in fact discussing *what counts as belonging to the world*. Our idea of what belongs to the realm of reality is given for us in the language that we useâ?• (15).

The pragmatic position is that in our use of language we are more situated that we can ever imagine. Even the discussion of the real is a contextual language game.

How do these concepts of language impinge on the questions of the real posed through modern physics, which purports to have the last word on the constitution of the real? In his book *Inventing Reality: Physics as Language*, Gregory provides a detailed account of the development of modern physics from Newton to Einstein to quantum electrodynamics and quarks, as rendered formulaic by Davies, Hawking, Penrose, Bohm, Peat, Gell-Mann, and others, but in a way that clearly brings out the dependence of science on language, indeed, its construction in language. He calls on speech act theory to do so, describing the history of science as a series of changes in the language of science. In this light:

> â??The word *real* does not seem to be a descriptive term. It seems to be an honorific term that we bestow on our most cherished beliefsâ??our most treasured ways of speakingâ?• (184).

â?¦ According to the physicist Werner Heisenberg, â??what we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our method of questioningâ?• (46), and Niels Bohr noted that for observations and calculations about sub-atomic particles â??no sharp distinction can be made between the behavior of the objects themselves and their interaction with the measuring instrumentsâ?• (139). Bohr (reported by Petersen) considered the implication and meaning of quantum mechanics assuming physics as a way of talking about the world:

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> â??There is no quantum world. There is only an abstract quantum physical description. It is wrong to think that the task of physics is to find out how nature is. Physics concerns what we can say about natureâ?• (305).

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Note

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Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. Meillassoux
2. naÃ¨ve realism
3. Peirce
4. pragmatism
5. speculative realism
6. technoromanticism

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