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# Monograph Review of Claude Mangion's "On Quentin Meillassoux and the Problem of Evil"

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## Abstract

This short article is a review of Claude Mangion's "On Quentin Meillassoux and the Problem of Evil", which is a scholarly monograph published in the journal *Open Theology* in February 2020. After providing a brief account clarifying the current state of the study of Meillassoux's philosophy, I explained, first, that the essay succeeded in reorganizing the ethical arguments the French philosopher had piecemeal and intermittently presented into a coherent discourse, second, that the Maltese scholar offered his own unique insight by pointing to a positive and practicable quality of Meillassoux's enterprise, and, third, that the text was well worth reading.

**Keywords:** Philosophy, Ethics, Theology, Morals, Quentin Meillassoux.

**Reviewed Monograph:** Mangion, C. (2020). *On Quentin Meillassoux and the problem of evil*. *Open Theology*, 6(1), 118-131.

Few of those who have studied philosophy with an earnest commitment would be nescient of the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, whom Phelps (2015) eulogistically called "a formidable force" amongst contemporary continental

thinkers (p. 343), and even when one needs to give an account of his intellectual importance for a person to whom the name is not familiar, one can do the business just by referring to the fact that his 2006 masterpiece *After Finitude*, for all that it was his maiden book, has been cited over two thousand times as of April 1, 2022. Besides, no small number of people would reckon it as another evidence of his significance that the opus “has found eager translators in a dozen or so languages” (Harman, 2013, p. 29). To put it in another way, he, along with his philosophical position that he has termed “Speculative Materialism” (Meillassoux, 2008a, p. 121), has become a subject discussed on a global scale.

However, it would behoove me to point out that there has been a grave problem with the reception of Meillassoux, which is that people have been arbitrarily selective in introducing and employing his thoughts. In more concrete terms, what has been problematic in the general treatment of Meillassoux is that, whereas other philosophers have frequently alluded to and drawn on his ontological discussion propounded in the abovementioned volume, his opinions on morals (in the broad sense of the term) have, notwithstanding that they actually constitute the primary and supreme concerns for him, by no means received condign heed – though I should add that part of the cause for the disparity lies in that he has presented his arguments about the matter in a sporadic fashion and held back from publishing a comprehensive disquisition.

We ought, given these circumstances, to accord high respect to Claude Mangion’s monograph “On Quentin Meillassoux and the Problem of Evil”, which, as its title signals, treated the issues squarely. Yet, we should not put it down as merely a commentary on the unexplored dimensions of Meillassoux’s philosophy or as a corrective to the aforementioned disproportion. Once one has read through it,

one will surely recognize not only that the Maltese scholar's comprehension of Meillassoux's theories is strictly accurate but also that he managed to skillfully reorganize relevant ideas the Frenchman had piecemeal and intermittently advanced into a coherent and cogent discourse, or, to paraphrase it in his words, he succeeded in "reconstructing in a systematic way" Meillassoux's "vision from the texts that, to date, deal with the problem of evil and its resolution" (Mangion, 2020, p. 130).

Albeit in a fairly sketchy manner, let me first recapitulate the cardinal elements of Meillassoux's ethical discussions by, after Mangion's fashion, applying the notion of evil as a unifying thread. The starting point is the contentions regarding what he has called the spectral dilemma, which, in a nutshell, denotes the ostensibly peremptory impasse that one reaches when gravely pondering over evil. It can be rendered as follows: if the Almighty that can atone for any woe should exist, it cannot but be dismissed as evil because it, despite its omnipotence, did not intervene and let the disaster happen, whereas, if it does not exist, one has no option but to altogether abandon the hope for justice. Meillassoux's operation to break the deadlock is essentially tripartite. The first tactic is frankly acknowledging that, considering the worldly conditions producing the dilemma, it is categorically unquestionable that the benevolent Omnipotence never exists at present. The second is posing an apparently bizarre but valid clarification that what is rightfully competent to thoroughly redeem bygone and coming evils in this world must be a being that is currently non-extant and totally exterior to the existing universe. The third, which is definitely the most revolutionary, is logically proving that to posit the real existence of the possibility that such a mighty entity, as well as an entirely new world where all evils can be expiated, can someday emerge is perfectly reasonable in the sense that the posit is never founded on an

indemonstrable dogma but a logical consequence of purely rational deduction (to check out firsthand the argumentation, see Meillassoux, 2008b, 2010, 2011).

Although I emphasize again that the foregoing overview contains omissions and is far inferior to Mangion's reconstruction, I suppose that it can at least function as a small piece of evidence to, if partially, show that his work of reconstructing the less studied aspects of Meillassoux's thoughts from the viewpoint of evil is valuable and illuminating.

But, having perused the paper several times, I cannot help feeling afraid that the significant degree of success of the reconstructive procedure may, in a sense, have a negative effect. In other words, I am apprehensive that the nonpareil excellence of the reconstruction might obscure the original and singular insights that Mangion himself offered. Therefore, in the remaining part of this review, I will foreground the most noteworthy of them, namely, a handful of those remarks in which Mangion pointed to the rarely mentioned aspirations of Meillassoux's endeavor at large.

Let me quote two observations consecutively. A sentence states, "Meillassoux's philosophy is . . . a rational endeavour that enables one to acquire knowledge of the world and with this knowledge create the possibility of hope—as opposed to faith—in the divine"; a different passage says, "A persistent motif in Meillassoux's thought [has been] that philosophy is not merely a theoretical or textual exercise but one that affects the entire being of the person. In other words, anyone who seriously accepts his ontological position would re-think the way they conducted their life" (Mangion, 2020, pp. 124-125).

We should not be unmindful of Mangion's discernment glittering in these statements, which quite properly indicate Meillassoux's ambition that appears to have somehow eluded

the attention of many. As is suggested, Meillassoux has, indeed, ever striven to establish, or re-establish a sound philosophy of *hope* that, equipped with the most solid reasoning possible, is capable of serving one as a compass with which one can orient one's life and of encouraging one to live with affirmative confidence. To elaborate on this from a broader perspective, the French thinker has been exerting himself to reinstate philosophy to the unique seat that it had occupied until the dethronement as a result of, to borrow the astute phrase of McKinney (2006), "the death of truth" epitomized in the present-day situation where "we say that no one is right and everyone is right" (paras. 16, 21). Whereas very few people have misinterpreted Meillassoux's philosophical enterprise as intending, say, to promote a nihilistic mode of thinking or to ostentatiously display his intellectual caliber, equally few have fathomed out this positive intent—though that paucity is understandable because it looms on the horizon only when one synthetically takes Meillassoux's total oeuvre into consideration. With an adequate mastery thereof, Mangion exactly espied that and expressed its quintessence in clear-cut language. This feat is no less admirable and consequential than his reconstruction.

As befits a reviewer arriving at the coda of this kind of writing, I shall conclude by delivering an overall verdict. With its revealing descriptions of underappreciated aspects of Meillassoux's philosophy and its subtle thought-provoking acumen, Claude Mangion's "On Quentin Meillassoux and the Problem of Evil" deserves to be read by all who want to get a full-length picture of Meillassoux's pursuits.

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