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A Critical Study of Quentin Meillassoux's Resolution of Hume's Problem

## Quentin Meillassoux'un Hume Problemi Çözümlemesi Üzerine Eleştirel Bir İnceleme

**Emin Çelebi**

Prof. Dr., İnönü Üniversitesi/Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi/Felsefe Bölümü, emin.celebi@inonu.edu.tr,  
ORCID: 0000-0001-8548-3811

**Mahmut Günel**

Doktora Öğrencisi, İnönü Üniversitesi/Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü/Felsefe Bölümü, gunelmahmut@gmail.com,  
ORCID: 0000-0003-0678-8559

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**Abstract**

This article examines Hume's problem, which constitutes one of the foundational points of reference for Quentin Meillassoux's speculative realism. It argues that while Meillassoux offers a largely compelling resolution of Hume's problem up to a certain point, he ultimately reverses Hume's position in the course of constructing his own theoretical framework. In order to substantiate this claim, the article first provides a general overview of Meillassoux's philosophical project and explicates the manner in which he addresses Hume's problem. It then proceeds to analyze the philosopher's assessments in detail. Within this framework, and particularly when considered in light of the principle of non-contradiction, it is argued that Meillassoux's account of "necessary contingency" does not amount to a substantive conceptual innovation, but rather remains at the level of a terminological reformulation.

**Keywords:** Meillassoux, Hume's Problem, Non-Contradiction, Speculative Realism, Correlationism

**Öz**

Bu makale, Quentin Meillassoux'nun spekülâtif realizminin dayanak noktalarından birini oluşturan Hume problemini ele almaktadır. Çalışmada, Meillassoux'nun Hume problemini belli bir noktaya kadar doğru çözümlendiği ancak kendi teorisini oluştururken Hume'ü tersine çevirdiği ileri sürülmektedir. Bu iddiayı temellendirmek üzere ilk önce Meillassoux'nun görüşlerinin genel bir özeti verildi ve Hume Problemini nasıl çözümlendiği gösterildi. Daha sonra düşünürün yaptığı değerlendirmeler analiz edildi. Bu çerçevede özellikle çelişmezlik ilkesi dikkate alındığında Meillassoux'un ileri sürdüğü "zorunlu olumsuzluk" ile ilgili ortaya koyduğu düşüncelerinin terminolojik olmaktan öte özsel bir yenilik taşımadığı ileri sürüldü.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Meillassoux, Hume Problemi, Çelişmezlik, Spekülâtif Realizm, Korelasyonculuk

## 1. Introduction

Quentin Meillassoux is one of the most prominent contemporary thinkers of contemporary realism, or speculative realism, today. The fundamental claim of speculative realism is that there exists a domain of being-in-itself that can be thought independently of the subject. In other words, it constitutes a rejection of the idea of an unknowable thing-in-itself. Consequently, this perspective or mode of approach directly compels the thinker to confront Kantian philosophy and post-Kantian thought. Meillassoux characterizes Kantian philosophy and the philosophies that emerged after it as correlationism. By correlation, what is meant is that only the correlation between thinking and being is accessible. That is to say, thinking and being cannot be isolated from one another. Accordingly, correlationism designates a mode of thought that rejects any approach based on evaluating layers of subjectivity and layers of objectivity independently of one another (Meillassoux, 2011, p. 5).

The thinker regards the claim that there exists a real being independent of thought as a contemporary reactivation of Cartesian philosophy. Certainly, this does not constitute a literal repetition of Cartesian philosophy. The role of Cartesian philosophy consists in making it possible to establish the existence of a real being independent of thought insofar as this existence can be determined through mathematics. He formulates this point in his own words as follows: “all those aspects of the object that can be formulated in mathematical terms can be meaningfully conceived as properties of the object in itself.” It should be noted that Meillassoux (2011, p. 3) does not deny that the sensible exists as the subject’s relation to the world. Alongside this, he argues that the object also exists independently of the subject’s relation to it, and maintains that this can only be known through mathematization. According to him, this situation is demonstrable and non-contradictory. Because there was no observer who directly experienced the process of the formation of the Earth, and because it is impossible to imagine a living observer surviving at such high temperatures. In this case, there is no alternative but to express what “measurements,” that is, mathematical data, allow us to define with regard to this event. In order to describe this condition, which may be called pre-thought, Meillassoux uses two terms: ancestral and arche-fossil or fossil-matter. By the term *ancestral*, he refers to every kind of reality that existed prior to the emergence of the human species. By the term *arche-fossil* or *fossil-matter*, he means materials that indicate the existence of an ancestral reality or event that predates life on Earth. In other words, an arche-fossil refers to the material supports upon which experiments rely in order to obtain estimates concerning ancestral phenomena (Meillassoux, 2011, pp. 10,11,12).

According to Meillassoux, no compromise is possible between correlation and fossil-matter: once one of them is accepted, the other is immediately rendered invalid (Meillassoux, 2011, p. 18). Consequently, this problem cannot in any way be thought starting from the transcendental, because the issue concerns a space-time prior to the spatio-temporal forms of representation. In this respect, it is impossible for the transcendental to be implicated in this situation. In other words, to think the ancestral is to think a world in which there is no thought — a world in which the world is not given Meillassoux regards thinking the ancestral as thinking the absolute. This also means conferring meaning upon science insofar as it provides knowledge of the ancestral (Meillassoux, 2011, p. 26, 28). In this case, the ancestral, independent being, and absolute belong to the same semantic cluster. Another key concept in Meillassoux's terminology in this context is facticity. Facticity is defined as the real characteristic of all things and all worlds, that is, their capacity to exist without reason and, consequently, their ability to pass into another state without cause. According to him, it is thus possible to demonstrate the absolute necessity of the non-necessity or contingency of all things. The point at which thought passes into what is independent of itself is facticity. In this respect, Meillassoux unites facticity, contingency, and necessity into a single conceptual framework (Meillassoux, 2011, pp. 54, 62, 63, 65).

The formation of the absolute in itself, and its mathematizability independently of the subject, simultaneously implies the rejection of the principle of sufficient reason. This is because facticity itself is absolute and uncaused. In other words, it is a contingent necessity. To express it in his own words: "...For although I can think the contingency of this existing thing, I cannot think the contingency of existence as such (or of the fact that something exists in general). Thus, I am perfectly incapable of thinking the abolition of existence, and so becoming inexistent is only conceivable as the becoming of a determinate existent, not as the becoming of existence in general." (Meillassoux, 2011, pp. 75-76).

Meillassoux notes that an analysis oriented toward the contingency of laws amounts to offering a speculative solution to Hume's problem. At the same time, David Hume's analysis of causality, according to him, represents an approach organized in opposition to the principle of sufficient reason. In this respect, Meillassoux examines Hume's problem in order to open a path toward an absolute unreason.

## **2. Hume's Problem**

Before moving on to Meillassoux's analyses, it is appropriate, in this context, to present concisely the paragraphs most frequently cited and which in

fact constitute the core of Hume's understanding of causality. Doing so will provide a proper foundation for the subsequent explanations:

All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, Relations of Ideas and Matters of Fact. Of the first kind are the sciences of Geometry, Algebra, and Arithmetic; and in short, every affirmation, which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain...Propositions of this kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is any where existent in the universe...Matters of fact, which are the second objects of human reason, are not ascertained in the same manner; nor is our evidence of their truth, however great, of a like nature with the foregoing. The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness... That the sun will not rise tomorrow is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction, than the affirmation, that it will rise...Were it demonstratively false, it would imply a contradiction, and could never be distinctly conceived by the mind...I shall venture to affirm, as a general proposition, which admits of no exception, that the knowledge of this relation is not, in any instance, attained by reasonings a priori; but arises entirely from experience...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?...All these suppositions are consistent and conceivable...In a word, then, every effect is a distinct event from its cause. (Hume, 2007, pp. 18-22)

Before turning to Meillassoux's analyses, it is necessary to make a few observations concerning the situation summarized in the passages above. First of all, Hume maintains that propositions belonging to mathematics and geometry possess a character of certainty. At the same time, such propositions can be known by reason alone, that is, by the mere operation of thought, without any recourse to experience. In contrast, propositions that Hume classifies as matters of fact can only be known through experience. The most important point that must be emphasized here is the following: for Hume, the fact that the contrary of a matter of fact implies no contradiction becomes the criterion for its not being knowable by reason alone. In this sense, independence from experience, being a priori,<sup>1</sup> and the impossibility of conceiving a contradiction come to mean the same thing and together constitute the definition of certainty. Although this determination may be regarded as problematic within its own context, this issue does not fall within the scope of the present study. For this reason, we shall not pursue it further here; however, references to it will be made later where appropriate.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *a priori* used here should be considered with regard to the context under discussion. For when Hume's general philosophy is taken into account, one can encounter different uses of the term *a priori*. For one example, see Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 334.

Meillassoux states that Hume's problem is shaped around the following question: *Is it possible to demonstrate that the same effects will always follow from the same causes ceteris paribus, i.e. all other things being equal?* In this case, this question concerns our ability to demonstrate that the laws of physics will remain the same in the future as they are today, or more fundamentally, our ability to demonstrate the necessity of the causal connection (Meillassoux, 2011, p. 85). Consequently, this problem is not about the future validity of our theories of nature, but about the future stability of nature itself. However, this problem does not aim to determine whether the laws of nature are deterministic or contingent.

Referring to the passage from Hume cited above, Meillassoux states that Hume accepted only two means capable of establishing the truth of existence or non-existence: experience and the principle of non-contradiction. Neither of these means can demonstrate the necessity of the causal connection. Meillassoux regards the principle of non-contradiction as the most suitable principle for the contingent absolute he seeks. According to him, the principle of non-contradiction is an absolute ontological truth. This truth emerges on the basis of its opposition to the principle of sufficient reason. In order for something to be able to become something else or anything whatsoever, it must be this and not that at a given moment. Accordingly, the ontological meaning of the principle of non-contradiction is revealed not as the designation of any fixed essence, but as the necessity of contingency, in other words, the omnipotence of chaos. Put differently, since it is impossible to prove that laws must remain as they are, the necessity of any fact cannot be established. On the contrary, taking only the requirements of logic and experience into account, everything—natural processes, things, or events—can pass into a state other than it currently is. There is no reason for anything to exist or to remain self-identical (Meillassoux, 2011, pp. 71, 87, 88).

Meillassoux, who interprets Hume's analysis of causality from his own philosophical perspective, also emphasizes that Hume never truly doubts causal necessity. According to the thinker, what Hume actually doubts is merely our capacity to demonstrate this necessity through reasoning. For this reason, Hume characterizes himself as a sceptic. According to Meillassoux, to be a sceptic is to acknowledge that reason is incapable of grounding our adherence to a necessity assumed to be real (Meillassoux, 2011, p. 90).

We will examine Meillassoux's views on this issue under the following heading:

### 3. Meillassoux's Attempt to Overcome Hume's Problem

As we stated at the outset, the focus of Meillassoux's speculative stance is to replace necessity with the contingent. The thinker emphasizes that Hume did not endeavor to overcome this necessity and, in fact, adhered stubbornly to it. On the other hand, he grounds one pillar of his speculative position in the Humean *a priori*. He expresses this as follows:

...take seriously what the Humean – not Kantian – *a priori* teaches us about the world, viz., that the same cause may actually bring about 'a hundred different events' (and even many more). What Hume tells us is that *a priori*, which is to say from a purely logical point of view, any cause may actually produce any effect whatsoever, provided the latter is not contradictory. (Meillassoux, 2011, pp. 90–91).

According to Meillassoux, Hume tells us that *a priori*—that is, from the standpoint of pure logic—any cause can produce any effect, as long as it does not violate the principle of non-contradiction. Because reason recognizes no *a priori* principle other than non-contradiction, it allows the actualization of every consistent possibility, and no principle exists to privilege one possibility over another. Reason teaches us that our billiard balls, on a billiard table, can indeed play out in a thousand different ways, even though there is neither cause nor reason for them to behave in any particular manner.

There is no objection to Meillassoux's assessment of Hume's *a priori* under normal circumstances. However, when we interpret this approach in light of what was said under the heading of Hume's problem, the following conclusion emerges: Hume misunderstood his own *a priori*. According to Meillassoux, Hume believes in necessity and does not accept that the outcomes of causal phenomena could be otherwise. In other words, Hume simultaneously believes in the possibility that what exists could be otherwise, while also adhering to necessity, thus failing to fully endorse his own observation. Meillassoux declares this to be Hume's contradiction and states: "Hume believes blindly in the world that metaphysicians thought they could prove." (Meillassoux, 2011, pp. 90–91). The question then arises: is this contradiction Hume's, or Meillassoux's?

Before answering this question, let us examine how Meillassoux attempts to overcome this contradiction. He argues that the impasses of Hume's problem can once again be addressed through reliance on reason. In this way, according to him, the place of scepticism, which has been misled by metaphysical necessity, can be taken by a speculative knowledge of the real world, which is non-metaphysical in character. Meillassoux explains his move toward a solution as follows:

From our point of view, if the necessity of the causal connection cannot be demonstrated, then this is simply because the causal connection is devoid

of necessity. But this is not to say that the speculative position eliminates every difficulty. For in fact we are going to reformulate Hume's problem in such a way as to shift its difficulty elsewhere. This reformulation can be stated as follows: instead of asking how we might demonstrate the supposedly genuine necessity of physical laws, we must ask how we are to explain the manifest stability of physical laws given that we take these to be contingent. Once reformulated, Hume's question is in fact the one we raised earlier: if laws are contingent, and not necessary, then how is it that their contingency does not manifest itself in sudden and continual transformations? How could laws for which there is no permanent foundation give rise to a stable world? Our wager is that this formulation of the problem, unlike its canonical version, allows of a satisfactory solution which requires no limitation of the capacities of rationality. (Meillassoux, 2011, pp. 90-91)

Meillassoux's thesis that "Hume believes in necessity" may at first appear plausible. For example, it is clearly observable that Hume does not believe in violations of the law in the case of miracles. However, it is highly debatable whether Hume here refers to necessity itself or to the condition that Meillassoux describes as the stability of the phenomenon. In his explanation of the a priori cited above, Hume had already pointed to the possibility of hundreds of additional outcomes, as in the example of the billiard balls, together with the impossibility of demonstrating the necessity of the cause-effect relationship. It should also be noted that for something to be necessary, Hume treats the impossibility of contradiction as a criterion. In this case, the fact that it is not contradictory to conceive of different outcomes in causal situations naturally implies that it is not necessary.

So, should we conclude that Hume both believes and does not believe in necessity? Since such a blatant contradiction seems unthinkable, why should it not be possible to say that Hume, like Meillassoux, believed in the stability of the law? Moreover, Meillassoux's observations also support this view. But what Hume tells us is that such a reason is entirely inaccessible to thought, for since we cannot demonstrate that the laws must remain as they are, we cannot demonstrate the necessity of any fact – on the contrary, it would be perfectly compatible with the requirements of logic and experience for everything to become other than it is, whether natural processes, things, or events. There is no reason for anything to be or to remain self-identical. To claim that there is no reason for anything to remain self-identical, why should this be understood merely as an epistemological statement? On the contrary, taking only the requirements of logic and experience into account, everything—natural processes, things, or events—can become other than it is. Nothing has a reason to exist or to remain self-identical (Meillassoux, 2011, p. 88).

As can be seen, Meillassoux essentially appears to be changing the terminology of Hume's problem. The place of being stable and being necessary is reversed. This raises the following question: what is the difference between being stable and being necessary? In this case, Meillassoux would probably answer,

centering on Hume's a priori: to be necessary is to be non-contradictory, whereas to be stable is to be logically conceivable. But isn't this answer already Hume's own? Should we then say that Hume believes in the necessity he rejects in factual matters simply because he does not use the term "stable"?

In this context, Harman's observation, with which we concur, seems apt: "A law means that one entity or field influences another in a specific way whenever these make the appropriate sort of contact. To say that 'the laws may change over time' is certainly radical, but it does not allow for complete contingency. For rather than being contingent, as Meillassoux promises, things are tied to necessary laws now as much as ever, but simply to laws whose character might change suddenly for no reason. Here once more, Meillassoux seems entirely focused on diachronic contingency, and does not seem bothered if the principle of sufficient reason continues to operate in a single instant." (Harman, 2015, p. 40). Here, one could well replace the principle of sufficient reason with the notion of necessary laws of nature. At this point, he turns to Kant and brings the issue to the problem of representation, stating:

Accordingly, our problem can be rendered still more precise:

in order to establish the validity of our speculative solution to Hume's problem, we must expose the nature of the logical fallacy inherent in the transcendental deduction, so as to show, contrary to what the latter maintains, that the constancy of the phenomenal world does not amount to a refutation of the contingency of physical laws. In other words, we must show why it is a mistake to infer, as Kant does, the destruction of representation from the non-necessity of laws. (Meillassoux, 2011, p. 93)

Here, one would have expected Meillassoux to correct Hume's error in order to provide a speculative solution to Hume's problem. Instead, he proceeds from the alleged fault of Kant's theory of representation. Considering Kant's position in opposition to Hume, Meillassoux's refutation of Kant leads, in a sense, to Hume being vindicated. This supports our view, expressed above, that Meillassoux's objection to Hume is not essential but rather a matter of terminological difference.

Accepting the principle of non-contradiction as fundamental, Meillassoux considers that the situation he labels stable—instead of necessary, and thus deemed contingent—can only be determined with mathematical certainty. He designates the condition that makes this possible as the transfinite (Meillassoux, 2011, p. 101).

Although Meillassoux claims to resolve Hume's problem by grounding it in mathematical certainty within the framework of the principle of non-contradiction, it appears that the problem is already removed from a strictly Humean perspective. Consider, for example, his (2011, p. 126) statement: "It is a matter

of holding fast to the Cartesian thesis – according to which whatever can be mathematized can be rendered absolute – without reactivating the principle of reason.”

Here, Meillassoux should arguably have stated that such a move is impossible. For if a matter can be resolved mathematically, and if one operates according to Hume's principle of non-contradiction, then any result obtained mathematically cannot be contradictory according to Hume's a priori. In that case, it is already certain, and the discussion would be closed—just as one cannot conceive of a round triangle. Yet, these explanations indicate that the situation is in fact not so straightforward.

Although Meillassoux claims to resolve Hume's problem by grounding it in mathematical certainty, he appears to approach the issue in a somewhat prejudiced manner. For instance, consider his statement: “It is a matter of holding fast to the Cartesian thesis – according to which whatever can be mathematized can be rendered absolute – without reactivating the principle of reason.” The phrase “without reactivating the principle of reason” should rather signal that such a move is already impossible. If a matter can be addressed mathematically and approached according to Hume's principle of non-contradiction, as noted above, then any mathematically obtained result cannot be contradictory according to Hume's a priori, and is therefore necessarily certain. Yet, Meillassoux hesitates, as if merely conjecturing, which in our view distances his statements here from full mathematical certainty and leaves the possibility of contradiction still conceivable (Meillassoux, 2011, p. 126).

In fact, fully aware of all these contradictions, Meillassoux (2022, p. 21) attempts to interpret Hume by claiming that he opens the way to understanding a rational world as chaotic. He then states, in a striking manner: “Indeed, if—contrary to our hypothesis—a real necessity were added to logical necessity; if the possibles were doubly constrained, both by non-contradiction and by existing constants, then an artificial mystery would be created, one that reason would clearly be incapable of resolving.” When Meillassoux's approach is considered carefully, one may say that he tends not to proceed from reality itself, but rather to treat a construction as if it were real.

One might respond to our critiques as follows:

So the challenge set for Meillassoux's factial is that necessity must be thinkable, but the necessity that is thinkable must not be a real necessity. In other words, the factial must 1) maintain some notion of eternal necessity, while 2) excluding any necessary being; Meillassoux must refuse every metaphysical absolute, yet retain ‘a little.’ (Watkin, 2011, p. 141).

From our perspective, the difficulty lies precisely in these formulations. For instance, what is meant by a “little absolute”? What is meant by a “necessity that is not real”? These notions, especially in the context of Humean philosophy, appear to reduce the discussion to a largely verbal or terminological debate, rather than engaging with the substantive ontological and metaphysical questions at stake.

Ultimately, it must be emphasized that, as noted earlier, the fundamental aim of both Hume and Meillassoux is to abolish the principle of sufficient reason. In doing so, the metaphysical question of why things are the way they are rather than otherwise can finally be answered—and that answer is: “There is no reason.” Meillassoux goes even further, asserting that responding to questions such as “Where do we come from?” and “Why do we exist?” with the answer “From nothing. For nothing.” constitutes the genuine, true response (Meillassoux, 2011, p. 110). This situation naturally raises the following question: can the proposition “There is no reason” be coherently conceived? Within this paradigm, the answer is affirmative. In that case, what becomes of the principle of non-contradiction? How is it that Meillassoux is able to construct this speculative framework precisely on the basis of Hume’s principle? If the very negation of this situation is itself conceivable, how can necessity and absoluteness—even if only contingently—be legitimately ascribed to it? All of these paradoxes remain fully operative and unresolved.

## Conclusion

In this study, we examined Meillassoux’s analysis of Hume’s problem on the path toward his speculative realism. It can be said that we largely concur with Meillassoux’s reading of Hume. However, we argued that when constructing his own theory after engaging with Hume, Meillassoux experiences, so to speak, a shift in axis. The implication is as follows: despite recognizing the gap opened by Hume, Meillassoux effectively inverts Hume in his movement toward the contingent absolute of speculative realism. In other words, when Hume’s principle of non-contradiction and his a priori approach are applied to Meillassoux’s theory, it becomes clear that this theory can be conceived as contradictory.

Initially, what one might have expected from Meillassoux was a refutation of Hume. Yet, by refraining from doing so and merely critiquing Hume for presupposing necessity, he implicitly suggests a tension with Hume himself. This approach tacitly carries the claim of taking Hume’s thought consistently to its ultimate conclusion. Nevertheless, it appears that, in practice, he moves contrary to the trajectory opened by Hume. Consequently, it can be argued that this approach, which ostensibly seeks to resolve Hume’s problem, in fact renders

the problem more complex, giving the impression that the divergence lies primarily in verbal or terminological differences rather than substantive theoretical resolution.

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