Pli 30 (2019), 49-71

Race and Universality: Meillassoux meets Eze and Wiredu

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Introduction

One of Emmanuel Eze's main questions in his book, *Achieving our Humanity: The Idea of the Postracial Future* is this: how is one to negotiate the tension between on the one hand, *the call* for a generic universality applicable to all humans irrespective of race and, on the other, *the need* to respect the singular identities created by the history of races and the black race, in particular? The tension is not so much about equality versus difference, but about the future prospects of both race and universality in general. In other words, Eze asks, how is the tension between the two going to be resolved in the future? Eze answers quickly and without ambiguity: 'In a world such as ours, only the ethics of universal will do'.[1] As this concise statement clearly shows, Eze therefore asserts the moral imperative for a universality that would eventually, in the future, structure humanity as a whole, thus finally cancelling out all racial differences. This is the only rightful universality foreseeable today. There cannot be another future.

As such, Eze diligently follows in the footsteps of many illustrious predecessors who have called for an absolute equality and freedom for all people irrespective of their races from, for example, Frederick Douglass's

[1] Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *Achieving our Humanity: The Idea of the Postracial Future* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 180.

call for a human brotherhood,[2] via Martin Luther King's dream that, one day, race becomes a signpost from the past, all the way to Achille Mbembe who recently called for a culturally plural world of 'passers-by' who know not what race is.[3] If we therefore accomplish such a longed-for future, then, as Eze says, 'what future is left for race? My own answer: none'.[4]

As such, Eze's assertive answer is yet again an exercise in hope in seeing one day a universality applicable to all. If one didn't know of his formidably rationalist analyses of race and reason, one could easily perceive Eze, through these statements, as an idealist in as much as he hopes to place this universality as the telos not only of all racial conflict, but of history as well. There cannot be in the future a world structured, for example, by a diaspora of absolutes, a strict division of races living in isolation, separated by walls, genetic engineering, or segregated by customs or laws. Universality is the only rational outcome of the fights and struggles of today, the only future in which the dichotomous relation between the same and the other finally vanishes. Eze doesn't shy away from this idealist hope. He even goes as far as saying: 'It is… like practicing to live in service of a particular future'.[5]

And yet, at the same time, Eze also insists that African thought must stand firm on history as a way of bringing this universal telos to fruition. The aim of this insistence is to highlight that, parallel to and in support of this universal telos, African and black sensibilities and modes of experiences in general must be preserved and defended. This is not just a call to preserve a tradition, a culture, a heritage, a genetic make-up, or an essence (a pan- or diasporic African identity, for example), but a strong commitment to history and to the outcomes and perspectives it has

[2] Frederick Douglass, 'What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?' in *The Frederick Douglass Papers I-2*, ed. by John W. Blassingame (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 387.
[3] Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. by Laurent Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 124.
[4] Eze, *Achieving our Humanity*, p. 180.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 181.

generated. As he says,

> what *must* be sought is a stronger commitment to history. A commitment to modern history in general—and to an open-textured understanding of black racial memory (not a biological racial essence)—provides a sound basis for philosophical criticism of black history as well as a basis for an ethically informed economic and cultural critique of anti-black racism.[6]

If one takes on board these two ethical ideals, it is then clear that for Eze, the future is structured not with one imperative, but two: the universal and the particular. In other words, for him, it is crucial that we not only abide to a universal principle but also, at the same time, that we protect the history that led to the creation of the black race, its various meanings and its many cultural incarnations. This is perhaps what makes Eze's attempt to think this tension so remarkable. Instead of simply seeking an absolute universality full stop, Eze emphasizes the importance of the universal in a situation in which we can no longer erase the history of races. Hence his careful and yet critical reading of Kwasi Wiredu's *Cultural Universals and Particulars,* for which, there is, on the one hand, a need for universality and on the other, an assertion of particularity, the two carefully tied together. Ultimately, Eze's aim is to show that there *should* be a universality that identifies us all as a species of bipeds and on the other, there *should* also be cultural particulars that not only cannot be denied, but also must be defended so as to avoid dangerous relativistic and ethnocentric interpretations of humanity.

But the question beckons: if one sets aside—if this is at all possible—the issue of particulars, then what does Eze mean when he talks of universality as the only ethical hope for humanity? What does Wiredu have in mind when he talks of a universal that would accommodate the particularities of races and their histories? As these questions show, the aim of this essay is not to focus on the tension between universality and particularity or unity and diversity, but on the definition of universality.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 206.

The aim is therefore not to formulate a theoretical or socio-political resolution, here and now, of Eze's tension between the suppression and/or defence of race, but to put forward an analysis of the very idea of universality in relation to the question of race. As will become clear, this idea of universality is neither a *utopian* 'nature' that would relativize all particular identities nor an *ideal* 'order' that would bring together everyone under one denomination. The idea of universality sought after is most simply an unquestionable fact free of conditional referents and therefore strong enough to withstand all forms of relativism.

In order to address this thorny issue, I will start first by looking at the way Eze and Wiredu address the question of universality through the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction, this undisputed fact that, for them, overcomes all forms of *utopian* and *idealist* universalities. By homing in on this Aristotelian basis for their universality, the aim is not to evaluate the social or political import of their arguments and therefore of its potential applicability in the future, but to simply assess the idea of using such a principle in this context. I will then proceed by altering this conception of universality through a reading of Quentin Meillassoux's own interpretation of the principle. This second reading does not constitute an introduction to Meillassoux's work, an attempt to critically evaluate his work in relation to other notions of universality, or a way of evaluating the political potential of his ideas in the context of race studies.[7] The aim is simply to re-evaluate Eze and Wiredu's take on the principle through Meillassoux's work. The hope with this juxtaposition of readings is simply to rethink the idea of universality *anew*, anchoring it so that it is finally able to truly accommodate the much-needed defence of race.

1. Eze, Wiredu and the Principle of Non-Contradiction

Contrary to what one might expect, neither Eze nor Wiredu analyse the idea

[7] For an introduction to Meillassoux's work, see, for example, Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

of universality from the perspective of a global identity or personhood. If they had, they would have ended up with the same kinds of arguments one can already find in Hegel, for which universality is basically that which is identical to all human beings and as such can only be turned into a global spectre (or Spirit) made up of the many ethnic, social, and cultural views it purports to transcend. Universality would then end up being yet another overarching identity (*idem*) that would define itself over and against particular ones (*ipse*), thus preserving itself as a kind of hegemonic totality—such as, for example, the supra-identity implied in universal human rights—always in need of redefinition.[8] And they probably would have ended up with the same kinds of arguments put forward, for example, by Judith Butler or Ernest Laclau, for whom, universality is ultimately an emergence that some groups can either appropriate (as western cultures are prone to do) or claim as theirs (as all other cultures and minorities tend to do).[9] Neither Eze nor Wiredu fall for such an easy conceptualisation of the universal as this trans-global 'not yet' or emerging 'to-come' never truly fulfilled or achieved. On the contrary, they carefully avoid such totalizing gestures to focus exclusively, as we will see, on the delicate and difficult tension between logic and biology.

Eze indeed says that, for Wiredu, one of the most basic and clearest form of universal is neither a cultural overarching global identity nor a metaphysical floating signifier such as 'human nature', but, most simply, the principle of non-contradiction as an intrinsic and inalienable characteristic of human thought. In classical logic, this principle is the second of the three laws of thought, the other two being the law of excluded

[8] On this topic and with a special focus on Hegel and Marx's understanding of universality as hegemony, see Étienne Balibar, 'Sub specie universitatis', trans. by Ermanno Bencivenga, in *Topoi* 25:1-2 (September 2006), pp. 3-16.

[9] Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000).

middle and the law of identity.[10] Ignoring the first and last laws, Eze and Wiredu simply state that the principle of non-contradiction is a trait of formal logic applicable to all humans endowed with even the most basic language. In this, they faithfully follow Aristotle's account in Book Gamma of *Metaphysics* that the principle of non-contradiction is independent of any specific ethno-socio-cultural content or linguistic specification and is therefore self-evidently[11] universal. This principle is stated thus:

> It is not possible for the same thing at the same time both to be and not to be.[12]

This is Aristotle's classic formulation of the principle of non-contradiction. It is a modal proposition[13] declaring that it is not possible for something to have a property and not to have it at the same time and in the same manner. So the universal principle that both Eze and Wiredu refer to is very much an indubitable fact for all humans able to think. As Eze writes, clearly referencing the particularity of the universal and cleverly narrowing down

[10] The law of excluded middle states that for any proposition, either it is true or its negation is true. No third possibility is given. The law of identity states that whatever is, is. One major reason prevents me from analyzing these two complementary facets of logic: it will lead me to analyse the principle of non-contradiction in relation to truth (in relation to the 'either/or' dilemma and the equation truth = idem). I can only leave the question of truth for another time, preferring to focus here on the principle of non-contradiction and universality.

[11] The self-evidence of the principle is famously demonstrated by Aristotle with a Socratic elenchus showing that anyone who refutes the principle de facto accepts the principle. Without anyone able to refute it, the principle is thus self-evidently universal.

[12] Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, 1005b, trans. by Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin Classics, 1998), p. 88.

[13] I understand Aristotle's principle as a 'modal proposition' because it relates to the mode of being (possible, impossible, necessary, contingent, etc.) and not to a sameness (beingness, for example). For a classic—and thereby Platonic—interpretation of the universal as an ideal, see Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, Vol. I, trans. by J.N. Finlay (London: Routledge, 1970).

the scope of the principle to a simple epistemic issue: 'When he tries to show the universality of the Akan bio-spiritual wisdom, Wiredu… draws the conclusion that the 'law of non-contradiction' is a prime example of universal norm regulating the human mind'.[14] There cannot therefore be a more basic trait: the principle of non-contradiction is applicable to all humans *endowed with thought*.

Strangely, while he seems to agree with Wiredu that this principle is a true universal, Eze does not define or explore it as such. Instead, he moves swiftly to Wiredu's applicability of this principle not just to a question of language and thought amongst humans, but to a question of ontology.[15] In doing so, both Eze and Wiredu *again* conform to the Aristotelian argument that immediately ties the principle of non-contradiction to being: a being is a non-contradiction because it cannot be and not be at the same time.[16] In this way, the universality of the principle is *not just* the result of a particularity of the human mind, which would then render it prone to all forms of relativisms or paraconsistent logic,[17] it is *the axiom* of being *qua* being.

However, unlike the Aristotelian model, both Eze and Wiredu tie this now onto-logical principle to a surprising *biological* evolutionary format. Eze writes:

> But the crucial objective is that Wiredu wishes to show how this universal law of non-contradiction is also a biologically grounded fact for all humans. Relying on [John] Dewey, this picture of genetic foundations of logic, which governs the law of non-contradiction, was drawn… [through] "habit," and habit, in this regard, form the biological basis of organic learning.[18]

[14] Eze, *Achieving our Humanity*, p. 200.
[15] Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 23.
[16] Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, 1006b, p. 90.
[17] As Wiredu says, 'Without this principle, there would be no telling when a message is affirmed or denied…' Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p. 38.
[18] Eze, *Achieving our Humanity*, p. 201.

The principle of non-contradiction is thus not only logically and ontologically sound; it is also the very evidence of the way human beings *came to be* biologically; how they *evolved over millennia* from a basic system of stimuli and response against an environment to a complex thinking-being organism for whom 'habit' is the essential non-contradictory structuring process. By linking it to a biological evolutionary format, Eze and Wiredu thus move beyond Aristotle to interpret the principle of non-contradiction as an immutable, time-spanning,[19] structuring, and bio-onto-logical property regulating the evolution of humans themselves.

And yet, like human beings themselves, the principle of non-contradiction is also curiously subject to the contingent, death and what cannot be anticipated or predicted. There would be no human being and therefore no universal principle without this crucial corollary condition that can potentially jeopardise everything. As Wiredu himself recognizes, '[the principle's] sufficiency, is, of course, not a sufficient condition for our future survival, but only a necessary one, *for there are obvious contingencies that could compromise that prospect*'.[20] We touch here on a crucial aspect of Eze and Wiredu's universal, one for which the principle is still at the mercy of the 'other' understood not spatially, but temporally. In order to posit itself as A and, more importantly, in order to persist over

[19] I realise the expression 'an immutable time-spanning property' might generate a problem with regards to time which can be summarized in this way: Aristotle's principle focuses on a simultaneity ('at the same time') to reveal an ontological fact. Turning this simultaneity into an immutable time-spanning property, as Eze and Wiredu suggest, diffuses it to the point where it no longer makes sense, that is, to the point where the simultaneity itself merges into the overarching time-span of the universe. However, as this essay attempts to show, the issue is precisely the problematic reduction of this simultaneity to an arbitrary bio-onto-logical given *raised to the status of universality*. In other words, the aim here is to show that it *must* be possible to think universality without necessarily tethering it to a type of Hegelian consciousness that curiously manages to extend itself beyond its time and place. For the way Meillassoux himself addresses the problem of Aristotle's simultaneity, see below, fn. 46.

[20] Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars,* p. 38.

time as A, the principle necessarily needs to pitch itself temporally in relation to the contingent and that which can potentially jeopardise this state. The validity of the principle then rests on this temporal propensity that, in negation, allows it to remain as *not* non-A. For example, in order to maintain myself as alive, I can only sustain myself negatively as not dead yet. In other words, by positing myself as not-dead-yet, I remain the embodiment of the principle of non-contradiction. This is the necessary structure of a universal principle stubbornly pitched logically, biologically and ontologically across short, long, or potentially infinite time spans.

So there you are. Through Eze and Wiredu, we have secured a universal principle that can be applied to all human beings, that coheres simply as a bio-onto-logical *fact* that nothing, except contingency or death itself can jeopardise. And through them, we have also secured a universal that is neither alien to the particular nor unable to accommodate the formation of racial identities as inherited archives, cultures and discourses. The universal is precisely a fundamental principle that persists across the ages, unifying and unquestionable notwithstanding specific races, their histories and identities. Thus secured, we can then now all hope, like Eze, for this universal that finally knows no forms of racialism or racism precisely because it rests on the most basic common trait amongst thinking humans, a trait that helps us ultimately, to survive and persevere (through 'habit') right into the future. It all looks pretty-straight forward.

But is it? Can one think of a universal in this way? There is something nagging about this bio-onto-logical universal that operates at *all times* across the centuries. The nagging aspect is perhaps the fact that the principle resembles Heraclitus's universal becoming, a perpetual flux that *structures itself in relation to* death and that which cannot be anticipated. How can a *universal*, one which necessarily pitches itself as a negative (i.e. it is clearly A and *not* non-A or *not*-dead yet) *also* structure itself in relation to non-existence and the utterly unforeseeable future? If it were *truly universal*, would it not then incorporate both of these, thus expanding its non-contradiction on everything and this everywhere and for all times? In other words, would this seemingly self-evident universal not also

necessarily contain in its negative positing *all* that it negates (i.e. what is already dead, what does not yet exist, as well as what cannot be envisaged or predicted) thus stabilizing it in its full sovereignty *for all eternity*? Once again, how can something *strictly universal*, something that structures survival everywhere and for everyone endowed with sensory receptors and/or thought, *know an exception* such as death and an incalculable future? And finally, doesn't the finite character of this evolutionary universal contradict the inalienable necessity of its eternity?

It seems to me that by tying Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction to a biological evolutionary scheme, Eze and Wiredu basically put forward *not* a principle of non-contradiction whereby A and non-A are *always* mutually exclusive, but a principle of *contradiction* instead, whereby *A is always already potentially non-A* because it contains within it, as part of its very constitution, everything that makes it non-A: the dead, non-existent, or unforeseeable.[21] In other words, Eze and Wiredu's universal is really a principle understood as a *constancy* that can die, an *immutability* susceptible to change, a *fixed unity* open to the contingent. Douglass's optimism, King's dream, Eze's hope, Wiredu's aspiration, or Mbembe's plan for passers-by are really empty yearnings because by being appended to bio-onto-logy, these universals will always already be *in potentia* that which they are not, Heraclitean contradictions unfolding themselves *as* contradictions.[22] At its most reductive—and this is what counts here above all—this is what universality effectively means: something that can never be altered or even challenged because it is *both* what 'is' *and* 'is not', what 'was' and 'will become'. Fixed *and yet* in flux, Eze and Wiredu's bio-onto-logical universal is effectively a contradiction that cancels the true universality it stands for, precisely because of its

[21] This does not support dialetheists' views. Contrary to logic, 'becoming' is contradictory because of its temporal structure. For a defense of Aristotle's principle as a metaphysical and not logical principle, see Tuomas E. Tahko, 'The Law of Non-Contradiction as a Metaphysical Principle', in *Australian Journal of Logic* 7 (2009), pp. 32-47.

[22] Heraclitus, *Fragments*, # 36, 57, 59, trans. by Bruce Haxton (London: Viking, 2001).

'changing immutability'.

2. Meillassoux and the Principle of Non-Contradiction

In order to sustain the argument that Eze and Wiredu put forward a universal understood as a principle of contradiction that cannot be universal strictly speaking and explore a potentially universal non-contradiction that might be free of conditional referents and therefore strong enough to withstand all forms of relativism, I need to turn here to Quentin Meillassoux, his own analyses of logic and temporality, and his rejection of Heraclitean becoming and of its many avatars (Deleuze, for example[23]). Choosing Meillassoux at this juncture is not a way of bringing yet another white European philosopher to propound and explain a conception of universality, like Heidegger's anti-biologist *Volk*[24] or Sartre's *singulier universel,*[25] for example. It is a way of agreeing unreservedly with both Eze and Wiredu that what is at stake when it comes to universality is indeed a principle of non-contradiction, but that the logic and temporality of this principle must be thought through before claiming universality as such.

Refuting the idea that there can be an immutable *and yet* changing universal acceptable by all across time (i.e. a flux structuring itself in relation to the contingent, death and the unforeseeable), Meillassoux writes:

> Imagine or rather try to conceive what a being able to support any contradiction would be: it has the property A and at the same time and in exactly the same conditions, it has the property not-A… Now,

[23] See amongst other, Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy,* trans. by Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), especially pp. 23-4.
[24] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper Collins, 1962), § 74.
[25] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'L'Universel singulier', in *Situations* IX (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), pp. 152-90.

> try to conceive that this entity has to change—to become something it is not—would it be conceivable? Of course not, it is already everything and its contrary.[26]

With this straightforward description of a contradiction, the very dream of a universal understood as a Heraclitean becoming thus gets shattered. For a universal to take place in perfect immutability *across time*, it would indeed not only need to be everything that it is not, it would also have to be everything that it can become.[27] The principle of contradiction is thus an absolute, fixed across time, that knows no outside and no other because it always already absorbs everything, including the contingent, death and the absolutely unforeseeable. As such, Eze and Wiredu's post-racial universal is not so much a disguised inter-temporal fascism in as much as it would exclude all others—including those to-come—but a contradictory dream or delusion that strangely conforms to the types of spectral universals (an *idem* always already to-come *above* all *ipse*) that they themselves discard.

In his critique of the principle of contradiction, Meillassoux goes as far as saying that such a generic universal 'being' would not only be lacking in temporality (because in its eternal flight it embodies a temporality that paradoxically never changes), it would effectively be incapable of living or

[26] Quentin Meillassoux, *Time Without Becoming*, trans. by Robin Mackay (Rome: Mimesis International, 2014), p. 28. I realise that Meillassoux's argument could be challenged by refuting its simplicity. Entities, especially humans, are always complex. Simply adding another property to Meillassoux's entity (X and non-X *in addition to* A and non-A, for example) would jeopardize the very thought of the contradiction he is unmasking. However, we are dealing here, very precisely, with the *simplicity* of *a* universal applicable to *all* humans and it is the reduction to this *simplicity* that needs to be challenged not in relation to space (in which case the entity could be construed, most dangerously, as a totality amidst many other totalities), but in relation to time.

[27] I realise I deliberately reverse Meillassoux's argument: if Meillassoux says 'if something is self-contradictory, then it cannot change', I note in reverse that 'if something is immutable, it is self-contradictory'. The reversal of the argument is justified in as much as what is targeted here is immutability, the fact that a contradiction (a Heraclitean 'becoming' as a universal, for example) can perdure over time.

dying. He writes, 'A contradictory being even loses all capacity for living and dying—for… its very existence is already non-existence and its non-existence already exists'.[28] There goes indeed Eze and Wiredu's dream. A universal understood as itself *and* its opposite in all eternity could not even take place. It could not begin or end because in beginning it would necessarily also end. It would remain eternally immutable *and* changing, a perfect flux excluding *and* incorporating all possible contingencies, a 'being' defying death *and* already dead, a 'becoming' shaping *and* abolishing all unpredictable future. This is what a universal that negatively pitches itself in relation to the contingent, death and the unforeseeable is all about: a contradiction, that is, an impossibility.

Overall, this means therefore that it is impossible to tie together the bio-onto-logical with the universal. This *does not mean* that dreaming of a 'becoming universality devoid of races' is absurd or pointless. On the contrary, a contradiction such as a 'generic bio-onto-logical universal becoming' in a way makes sense: as Nahum Dimitri Chandler and Fred Moten have so clearly demonstrated, you *can* define it and reason it rigorously[29] and as Étienne Balibar has so remarkably shown in his own analyses of the universal, you *can* work towards achieving it through individual or collective action by structuring it, for example, as 'an ideal always-already "beyond" any simple or absolute unity and therefore a

[28] Quentin Meillassoux, 'Contingency and the Absolutization of the One', trans. by Benjamin James Lozano, conference paper given at Sorbonne-Paris I for the symposium *Metaphysics, Ontology, Henology*, 13 March 2011, p. 13.

[29] Chandler and Moten's call for an ontology of dehiscence is here indeed exemplary of a recent attempt to come up with a specific bio-onto-logical becoming. As Moten writes, referencing Nahum Dimitri Chandler's work: 'The lived experienced of blackness is, among other things, a constant demand for an ontology of disorder, an ontology of dehiscence, a para-ontology whose comportment will have been (toward) the ontic or existential field of things and events'. Fred Moten, 'The Case of Blackness', in *Criticism* 50:2 (Spring 2008), pp. 177-218. See also, Nahum Dimitri Chandler, 'On Paragraph Four of 'The Conservation of Races', in *CR: The New Centennial Review* 14:3 (2014), pp. 255–288.

permanent source of conflict'.[30] But however much it offers a reasoned potential, such a 'generic bio-onto-logical universal becoming' unfortunately can never take place. Heidegger already says this when he remarks, most simply, that however you understand it, a contradiction over time cannot be at all.[31] In other words, a contradictory unity can indeed be dreamed and constructed in any given circumstances, but it will always flounder faced with risk, finitude, and the utterly unpredictable. As such, anyone who attempts to think a universal principle, such as Eze or Wiredu, necessarily puts forward a metaphysical aspiration that might highlight how things *must* be, they do so knowing that these things can *never* take place.

So the question can no longer be avoided: How can one indeed push further the idea of universality in such a way that it ceases to be contradictory, that it stops being an impossibility, just a dream of something that can never take place, let alone unify humanity peacefully? In other words, can there be a universal that is not 'becoming', is free of the bio-onto-logical *and yet remains paradoxically human, all too human*? This is where I would like to propose to go back and re-think the principle of *non*-contradiction. If one is rigorous about this principle, then one needs *to rethink it in such a way that it never turns into a spectral becoming*, for which all of tomorrow has already been absorbed all the while remaining contradictorily subjected to bio-onto-logical determinations of time and place. The task is difficult because it calls for a logical thinking that is both eminently and universally human and yet neither biological nor evolutionary. How is one then to re-think the principle of non-contradiction, this inalienable universal free of bio-onto-logical becoming?

The radical re-thinking of the principle of non-contradiction is effectively performed by Meillassoux in his own critique of universal

[30] Étienne Balibar, 'Ambiguous Universality', in *Politics and the Other Scene,* trans. by Christine Jones, James Swansen and Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2002), p. 173.
[31] Martin Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. by Michael Heim (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 53.

becoming. He proposes to understand the principle of non-contradiction as absolutely contingent. As he says, 'non-contradiction is a condition of contingency…[it] is the condition of a radical chaos, a hyper-chaos'.[32] What can this possibly mean and how does it affect the way we might understand Eze and Wiredu's universal differently? The simplest way to make sense of this is to begin by reversing the tables: instead of imagining a universal that would be fixed across time, we need to think a universal as always changing *unpredictably*. The crux of this drastic reversal is simply that a universal, such as 'becoming', for example, is effectively structured by a type of Leibnizian principle of sufficient reason[33] that renders it temporally constant. In other words, there can be no universal that perdures over time if its perdurance doesn't continue to make sense over time. This is precisely why it is a principle of contradiction: the contradiction sustains itself as a contradiction without end, its cause producing its effect not *ad aeternam*, but *ad infinitum*.[34] Meillassoux goes against this idea and proposes to understand the principle of non-contradiction as having no

[32] Meillassoux, *Time Without Becoming*, p. 28.

[33] This principle states that nothing happens without structural laws. For example, for every fact 'A', there must be a sufficient reason why 'A' is the case. Or put differently, 'from nothing, nothing comes' ('*ex nihilo, nihil fit*'), which simply means that an existing thing cannot have nothing as their cause. See G.W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, trans. by Leroy E. Loemker (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishing, 1989), especially pp. 412-44.

[34] The difference between infinity and eternity cannot be explored here in any satisfactory depth. Suffice to say, for clarity's sake, that infinity stands for what knows no bound or is larger than any known number; eternity by contrast, is strictly a-temporal without at the same time being out of time, hence the importance of perceiving it alongside universality, as being what is strictly devoid of spatial particularities without in turn being out of space. As we will see, eternity and universality stand for time itself, hyper-chaos in act.

reason whatsoever, an absolute[35] universal that knows no sufficient sense; that is absolutely contingent—hyper-chaos itself.[36] But how can one make sense of a universal without *at least* a semblance of reason, such as 'unpredictability', for example?

Firstly, it is clear that something that has no reason whatsoever is *not*

[35] Every time the word 'absolute' or later, the word 'eternal' is mentioned, it is crucial to remain if not sceptical, at least a little circumspect. Meillassoux goes to great lengths to assert his magisterial capacity to access an 'absolute' free of the correlationist circle. While he polishes proofs of this access, I think we ought to keep in mind that any articulation of an 'absolute' necessarily assumes the absolutely changeable character of thought that necessarily goes with it and this, as long as they are minds thinking. To say this does not return us inside the correlation, for which an absolute is always relative to thought. It simply affirms, on the contrary, the absolute contingency of any thought of the absolute, which should really be the first condition of any reflection of an absolute as hyper-chaos. As the evidently correlationist Heidegger poignantly intimates at the edge of the correlation: 'We cannot deduce the unchangeability of our mind and of its basic constitution as absolutely remaining the same. We are stuck with this fact and therefore with the contingency and unconditionedness of the factual'. Martin Heidegger, *Logic: The Question of Truth,* trans. by T. Sheehan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 37.

[36] Meillassoux understands hyper-chaos in a specific way. He writes: 'We traditionally conceive of two different kinds of chaos: On the one hand, there is a necessary chaos, which we identify as comprised of a series of necessary processes that exist, but are ultimately devoid of any purposive ends… And on the other hand, the concept of chaos can also denote a random chaos, in so far as its processes are governed by chance encounters between independent particles or causal series'. A good example of a type of chaos that intertwines these first two apperceptions would be the Caribbean chaos in Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, trans. by James E. Maraniss (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996). Having discarded these chaoses, Meillassoux then proceeds to explain what he understands by hyper-chaos: 'The chaos of which I'm thinking here is capable of altering or even reconstituting the laws of nature themselves. I label this extreme kind of chaos—which is neither deterministic nor random—a hyper-chaos' (Meillassoux, 'Contingency and the Absolutization of the One', p. 13). He makes the same distinction between empirical and absolute contingencies in Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. by Ray Brassier (London: Continuum 2008), p. 62.

something that is irrational. On the contrary, the principle of non-contradiction is clearly rationality itself (A cannot be non-A), what is observable, self-evident and/or scientifically knowable. However, it can only *be* so if it is *consistent with* a world, nay a universe, that is *not* supremely logical and constant over time, as it is the case with 'becoming', but instead entirely chaotic, that is, without cause, telos, or structuring flux. As Meillassoux says, 'an entirely rational world would be by that very token entirely chaotic: such a world is one from which the arbitrary belief in the necessity of laws has been extirpated…'.[37] In other words, what is rational is what is entirely chaotic and anything that appears logical and necessary is just an arbitrary belief *put out from finite ontical perspectives*. Rationality is here not what is consistent, but what conforms to life itself, that is, with something that is utterly contingent, even if it appears to us as obeying specific logical laws (such as the laws of thermodynamics, gravity, or relativity, for example). Extirpated from these arbitrary beliefs and logical laws, the world or more precisely the universe thus reveals itself finally in all its rationality, a rationality utterly without reason, rational hyper-chaos in act.

So when it comes to thinking a universal principle, we therefore need to get rid of the Leibnizian principle of sufficient reason that sustains 'becoming'.[38] In the context of a principle of *non*-contradiction understood as entirely chaotic and without cause, this sufficient reason becomes indeed meaningless because all manifestation appears *rationally*, but without reason. Free from this arbitrary belief, free from seemingly logical laws, the universality of hyper-chaos, this absolute non-contradiction becomes the very *rational* power that creates whatever is and this without reason whatsoever. In this way, to formulate a universal is to deny it sufficient reason, to cut out the fact that it might be a looming becoming that perdures

[37] Quentin Meillassoux, 'Potentiality and Virtuality', trans. by Benjamin James Lozano, in *Collapse* II (March 2007), pp. 76-77.

[38] Especially because such a principle is always already tied to a metaphysical dimension ruling over universality, as in for example, when Leibniz says: 'This final reason for things is called God'. Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, p. 639.

over time and reinstate it for what it is, namely something entirely rational precisely *because* conform to the radical contingencies of life itself.[39]

In this way, Meillassoux's denial of the principle of sufficient reason is therefore a way of revealing the very rational hyper-chaos that structures everything and is embodied[40] in the principle of non-contradiction. Through such an entirely rational principle, reason thus finds its true 'order', but this 'order' is no longer a transcendental a-historical/a-spatial entity (God, Spirit, Nature, for example) or a device that dis-jointedly perdures across time (being, becoming, trace, *différance*, for example). These classic entities are essentially 'always already' structured by principles of sufficient reason that sustain themselves by contradictorily incorporating all that they are not. Isn't this exactly what *différance*, for example, is all about: it differs/defers everywhere and at each moment, structurally hiding a secret—the radically Other—'always already' *with*

[39] Inversely, this also means that the principle of sufficient reason is therefore entirely irrational because it conforms to artificial ontical and finite perspectives. See Meillassoux, 'Potentiality and Virtuality', pp. 76-77.

[40] Inevitably, the question here is this: how does the principle of non-contradiction 'embodies' hyper-chaos? In order to address this issue, Meillassoux resorts to a number of strategies, none of which is, of course, entirely satisfactory: for example, the most basic element of non-contradiction would be either a meaningless mathematical sign (Quentin Meillassoux, 'Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign', trans. by Robin Mackay, conference paper given at Freie Universität (20 April 2012), unpaginated) or the creative poetic gesture that gives the unique Number (Quentin Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé's Coup de Dés,* trans. by Robin Mackay (New York: Urbanomic Sequence Press, 2012). There is unfortunately no space here to critically engage with these solutions. For a commentary, see Vincent van Gerven Oei, 'By any language necessary: Quentin Meillassoux and the Question Concerning Signification in Philosophy', in *Quaderna* 2, unpaginated.

sufficient reason.[41] The non-irrational 'order' that Meillassoux proposes instead is free of such perduring structuring reason. It no longer needs to sustain itself 'always already'. It is, most simply, a hyper-chaos without cause or telos, ground or gravity. As Meillassoux says:

> The refusal of the Principle of Sufficient Reason is not the refusal of reason, but the discovery of the power of chaos harboured by its fundamental principle (non-contradiction), as soon as the latter is no longer supplemented by anything else—the very expression "rational chaos" from that moment on becoming a pleonasm.[42]

Giving up on reason is effectively the first step towards rationalism, but a paradoxical one: it is a rationalism that explain why things are indeed without reason. In this new order that isn't one strictly speaking, absolute contingency thus becomes the only material necessity,[43] that is, it becomes the only thing that 'is', and will continue to 'be' for ever and this even after

[41] Developing this point, unfortunately, goes beyond the scope of this essay. However, I will simply add this: In his essay, 'The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils', Derrida shows that in order to assert that there must be a reason, Leibniz's principle first needs to assume that an essence exists in order for it to be rendered. With such a deconstructive move, Derrida unwittingly swaps the abyssal question of being for another abyssal issue, that of the radically Other lurking behind or beyond this reason. Such a swap shows that Derrida and his famous cypher still remain under the empire of Leibniz's principle. See Jacques Derrida, 'The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils', trans. by Catherine Porter and Edward P. Morris, in *Diacritics* 13:3 (Autumn 1983), especially pp. 7-10.

[42] Meillassoux, 'Potentiality and Virtuality', pp. 76-77.

[43] Meillassoux distinguishes a *logical necessity* that would be the result of probabilistic reasoning (Kant and Popper's interpretation of Hume's billiard ball, for example) from a *materialist necessity* that would be inaccessible to probabilistic reasoning. The latter is obviously what is at stake when referring to absolute contingency. On this topic, see Meillassoux 2008, pp. 87-101 and for a clear exposition of Hume's billiard problem, see the first part of Quentin Meillassoux, *Science Fiction and Extro-Science Fiction*, trans. by Alyosha Edlebi (London: Univocal Publishing, 2015).

the last man dies.[44]

This is then the only true universal we can hang on to. It can be stated simply as the principle of non-contradiction in as much as it embodies or, perhaps more precisely, stands for a rational hyper-chaos without reason. The crucial aspect of this principle is that *the temporal structure it points to finally matches its universality*. If it is indeed universal, then it must also be eternal. Contrary to the impossibly fixed perpetual becoming that Eze and Wiredu dream of, the principle of non-contradiction embodies a chaos, this time *properly eternal* not because of some internal consistency keeping it together, but because it proceeds eternally and chaotically without reason. As Meillassoux says:

> Non-contradiction clearly acts as an eternal principle, guaranteeing that anything is capable of becoming other and therein guaranteeing that everything remains contingent. And the eternal value of this law is grounded in the eternal necessity of the contingency of the real.[45]

Contingency itself is therefore the sole necessity, and non-contradiction is what guarantees our ability to come into and out of existence without therein relying on the dialectic of an eternal return of being to itself or articulation as a secret radically Other sustaining *différance* everywhere and everywhen. So if we set aside for a moment our logical but arbitrary laws, we are left with a pure contingency that just happens, hyper-chaos

[44] As Mathieu Watrelot says: 'Contingency isn't an entity that could exist by itself and that could stand for a world apart from necessity. Contingency takes place because there is something'. Mathieu Watrelot, 'Quentin Meillassoux et l'équilibre du chaos', in *Zone Critique* (Saturday 9 January 2016), unpaginated. http://zone-critique.com/2016/01/09/quentin-meillassoux-et-lequilibre-du-chaos (accessed June 2017).

[45] Meillassoux, 'Contingency and the Absolutization of the One', pp. 16-7.

chaotically maintaining itself as hyper-chaos without reason.[46] Who can dream of a more persuasive universality, one that states itself purely as A and *not* as non-A, occurs without reason, remains eternally rational and is free of the subjection of time and place without, *at the same time,* contradicting the inherent and inevitable viewpoint from which one identifies and articulates it?

Conclusion

Now inevitably, this final question cannot be avoided: can this universality understood as an eternally rational hyper-chaos be used to affect the way races are perceived in the future? Returning to Eze's original question, can we therefore say that this rational principle helps to better negotiate the tension between *a call* for a universal and *the need* to respect the history of races? The answer is 'perhaps, yes' and this for one specific reason: an absolutely contingent universality, one that isn't structured by the bio-onto-logical, but from which the bio-onto-logical is derived, has at least one advantage: it cannot be understood as an overarching spectral entity understood as a promise on the horizon. This is an important advantage because a universality that is understood as a constant becoming, that is, as a principle of contradiction that absorbs all future is necessarily plagued by

[46] From this, it is fair to deduce that since hyper-chaos has no *arche* or *telos*, it thereby stands for time *itself*. In order to demonstrate this, Meillassoux focuses on the role of simultaneity in Aristotle's formulation of the principle of non-contradiction. He writes: '[Aristotle's] use of the expression 'at the same time' is deceptive because it makes no reference to the empirical or psychological nature of time, neither of which can experience this "instant" that has no spatial character, but nonetheless gives meaning to the sentence'. The simultaneity in the principle thus refers to nothing empirical and yet it is true of every empirical object. Similarly, the sentence refers to nothing temporal and yet in order to make sense, it needs this 'time' that appears nowhere. What we then have is the necessity of time *as such* in as much as it is what deploys being in its absolute contingency. See Quentin Meillassoux, *L'Inexistence Divine*, unpublished PhD Thesis, Université de Paris I, Department de Philosophie. https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B9wQhBuMs-siVV9SRW1hdHQtanM/view [accessed January 2016), p. 99.

the finite particularities that also become, but *cannot* be understood as universal or eternal. It is plagued because what is universal and eternal cannot accommodate what is particular and finite. Unable to match the particular, this universal thus becomes spectral, an abstract overarching entity dragged from an immemorial past and placed in the future so as to haunt the particular and its many idiosyncrasies. Hence Douglass, King, Eze, Wiredu and Mbembe's dream or hope *haunting* our violent racialized and racist present.

Free from this classic spectrality that never ceases to taunt us, we can now begin to rethink Eze's tension. Understood as a rational hyper-chaos, the universal no longer needs to state itself as the non-place or hope for the particular. Properly eternal and universal, the principle of non-contradiction points to something unequivocal: hyper-chaos rationally perduring as hyper-chaos, without beginning, end, or reason. There is a brute and concrete reality to this that cannot be made spectral because it is that *from which* derives our coming to be for no reason whatsoever. So even if we obey some arbitrary realities and laws, the universal is not something on the horizon to which we must ethically swear allegiance to and/or work hard to enact as soon as possible; it is precisely what *allows* these arbitrary laws in the first place. In this way, the particular derives from the universal and not the other way round. It is from the premise of this hyper-chaotic eternity and universality that the particular structures itself in all its arbitrary and yet il-logical realities, including human rights and racism. Consequently, universality is effectively already here, in the very constitution of what makes us human, black, white, or any other logical or illogical, but in all cases, arbitrary determination.

Ultimately, the only thing we now have left is, of course, Eze's rightful call to insist on history, but this history is now *not* leading up towards universality. This history is now *derived* instead from the eternity and universality that is the hyper-chaos of non-contradiction. Deriving from such a hyper-chaotic rationality, history—and, as Eze reminds us, the open-textured understanding of black racial memory in particular—provides not only for an ethically informed socio-cultural and political

critique of racism, it also opens up the possibility of an active subject of history who is effectively better armed to carry out such a critique. If there is indeed no longer a spectral universality looming ahead in the future imposing its own diktats as the not-yet we need to achieve, then what is there to stop us from adhering to the hyper-chaotic universality from which we derive and from such an unusual stronghold—because utterly unpredictable—denounce all illogical reasonings about other fellow humans? This does not mean that we work in a chaotic manner or that racism needs to be fought in unpredictable ways. This simply means that from our common principle of non-contradiction, we are better positioned to expose the dangerous histories that deviate us from what we are: arbitrary determinations and beliefs wedded to spurious principles of reason.[47] Exposing such *arbitrariness* can only thus let the hyper-chaos out of which they derive from shine through for the first time. This is the only purpose of a history finally understood as free not only of all spectrality, but also, of all *arché* and all *telos*.

[47] We believe in these arbitrary, but logical histories because they make perfect sense and they do so because they derive from what has no reason whatsoever. As Meillassoux says: 'The perfect "logicity" of everything is a strict condition of the absolute absence of reason for anything'. Meillassoux, *Time Without Becoming,* pp. 28-29.