REVIEW ESSAY/ESSAI CRITIQUE

Towards a Transcendental Materialism: Johnston’s Attempted Marriage of Recent Neuroscience and Lacanianism


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The first volume in a planned trilogy, The Outcome of Recent French Philosophy, as Johnston notes, operates as something of a clearing of the throat before his announcement of a positive account of his “transcendental materialism” in the coming two works, A Weak Nature Alone and Substance Also as Subject. While drawing the outlines of his own materialism, Johnston uses this book to demonstrate the limits of three encounters with materialism in recent French philosophy by Jacques Lacan, Alain Badiou, and Quentin Meillassoux. Here, I cannot go through Johnston’s important, close readings of these thinkers, and instead I will focus on what he thinks his transcendental materialism must accomplish. These readings, in any case, are each in a similar mode: the reliance on formalism, especially set theory in the latter two, overtakes any materialism these thinkers would invoke and thus Johnston argues for a rapprochement between the biological sciences and Continental theory. I think Johnston’s case is often persuasive concerning Meillassoux and Badiou and is a view I largely share, though any depictions of biology as the real must come with a full encounter with the biopolitical abuses of such categories.¹ There will be room, though, for my own disagreements with him, but let me note that in an age where every young philosopher seems ready, based on the shadiest readings of the philosophical tradition, to posit some new grand schema, to treat other philosophers as knaves and fools for not getting on the band-

¹ See in particular, Chapters Two and Three of my Speculative Realism: Problems and Prospects (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming).
wagon of some supposed new materialism or realism, Johnston’s work should be given the widest reading and engagement.

In Žižek’s Ontology (2008) and Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change (2009), Johnston argued forcefully for a Žižek-inspired Lacanianism whose principle is that immanent genesis can produce transcendent affects at both the subjective and political levels. In Žižek’s Ontology, Johnston worked out this principle in terms of Žižek’s writings on Kant, Schelling, and Hegel, and in Political Transformations he worked to consider how systems rupture as a result of genetic mutations from within those systems, producing “events” that mark something new on the scene; here we see Badiou’s influence. In Žižek’s Ontology, Johnston asked, “In light of what is presently known regarding the deterministic influences operating at historical, psychical, and biological levels, is there space left for a subject that could be said to be free in any meaningful sense?” ² His answer there is affirmative:

Being free is a transitory event arising at exceptional moments when the historical, psychical, and biological run of things breaks down, when the determining capacities of natural and cultural systems... are temporally suspended as a result of deadlocks and short circuits being generated within and between these multifaceted, not-whole systems. (ŽO, 286–87)

In the present work, along with what serves as companion chapters in his contribution to Self and Emotional Life: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Neuroscience, co-authored with Catherine Malabou (2013), Johnston takes up the challenge to elaborate this “biological run of things” in terms of recent work in neuroscience. Malabou’s writings are well known for their announcement of a neuroscientic deconstruction of the self in terms of what has been studied under brain plasticity. For his part, Johnston similarly looks to turn-about against anti-naturalisms found in the Continental philosophical tradition, arguing that no materialism should deny the outcome of recent scientific endeavours. “Over the past half century, scientific matter concerning neuroplasticity, mirror neurons, epigenetics, and newly proposed revisions to Darwinian depictions of evolution have destroyed,” he writes in Self and Emotional Life, “the caricature of biological approaches to subjectivity upon which the ever more

² Adrian Johnston, Žižek’s Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 286. Henceforth cited as ŽO.
hollow excuses of a tired old antinaturalism rely.” The task, then, is
to wed the metapsychological account of subjectivity in (Lacanian)
psychoanalysis to findings in the neurological and biological scienc-
es, while also, it should be said, keeping in mind a Marxist-Maoist
dialectics that makes possible his political critique of the biopolitical
order.

Johnston avers that Continental philosophy has been profoundly
antinaturalist, which in turn has meant opening the door for various
theisms to operate in this area of philosophy, despite the avowed
atheisms of such figures ranging from Husserl to Derrida to Badiou.
(SEL, 37). Johnston’s transcendental materialism wants to slam this
doors shut. In this, Johnston joins such thinkers as Martin Hägglund
and Quentin Meillassoux, who think the time has come to push back
against the theological invocations of supposed radical thinkers. As
he puts it, “No intellectually responsible philosophical materialism
can justify ignoring the evidence unearthed in these highly produc-
tive fields...unless, of course, what is secretly or unconsciously
desired is a spiritualist ideology disguising itself in the faded-fashion
garb of a now awfully dated antinaturalism.” (29) (That said, John-
ston admits his depiction of religion is without much nuance, since
he thinks any subtlety cedes part of the intellectual field to the the-
ists among us. [14]) It’s also the case, though, that Continental phi-
losophy has been not been wholly antinaturalist for some time,
except if one has a rather circumscribed idea of what counts as this
area of philosophy. Notable thinkers include not just the writers he
takes up, but also Jane Bennett, Elisabeth Grosz, Gilles Deleuze, John
Protevi, François Laruelle, William Connolly, Ray Brassier, Ian Hack-
ing, and Shaun Gallagher. Moreover, naturalism is also the shared
ethos of Anglo-American philosophy, which I mention since Johnston
conspicuously does not take up much work in philosophy of mind,
with the upshot that a Continental version of this area occasionally
runs roughshod over important distinctions carefully laid out by his
Anglo-American colleagues.

The point for Johnston is to demonstrate how the most prominent
supposed materialisms in Continental philosophy are beholden not
just to Lacanian insights—he shows what Badiou and Meillassoux
borrow from Lacan—but also suffer from the latter’s reliance on
formal mathematics as a path to the real. In the first section of the
book, this means praising Lacan’s “materialism,” which in the first

3 Catherine Malabou and Adrian Johnston, Self and Emotional Life: Philosophy,
Psychoanalysis, and Neuroscience (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013),
xi. Henceforth cited as SEL.
chapter seems a passkey to any future project in the area, though Chapters Two and Three begin his critique of Lacan. He contends that, first, Lacan’s denunciations of certain sciences are outdated, and, second, Lacan’s privileging of formal mathematics over the biological sciences proffers an antinaturalism no longer sustainable. In the sections on Meillassoux and Badiou, Johnston accuses both of not having worked out notions of flesh-and-blood subjectivity, and their set theory-based systems means leaving the empirical as secondary in their systems to their formal systems. The book ends with a postface providing the outlines of the remainder of the trilogy and how it builds on this first volume.

Turning to his overall project, Johnston’s transcendental materialism, via Lacan, would leave some thinking he would need some of the same hermeneutic backflips that one finds in those he critiques for bringing together the latest theory and some theoligism. Lacan is highly formalist—thus his avowed “structuralism” and late use of topological theory—and however complicated this notion, the “Real” in Lacan seems to cut off discussion of ontology, as Lacan himself noted, that would spring from his metapsychology. Indeed, Johnston seems to move in this book between two different Lacans when needed: In the first chapter, when he wants to offer a rapport between Lacanianism and naturalism, he rebukes those who would conflate the Real as “akin to Kant’s sphere of the noumena.” (34) He then will report Lacan’s own words on not being Kantian and being a materialist, but these disavowals do not lessen the force of Lacan’s own writings—and Johnston piles up the evidence of antinaturalism himself. One should recall the robust feminist and queer theories that rely on Lacan’s denaturalization of sex and the phallus, and thus one can feel an attempt to renaturalize Lacan as anything but a step forward for a number of Lacanians. In any case, having set up this non-Kantian Lacan in Chapter One, in Chapter Three, when arguing against Lacan’s view that there is no thinking before or outside of language—as Lacan himself puts it, “the symbolic universe exists first, and the real universe comes to settle down in its interior”—Johnston then describes how, by “following closely [my emphasis] in Kant’s footsteps,” Lacan demarcates as the Real the pre-/non-symbolic reality of an archaic pre-history, as found in Johnston’s favoured accounts of recent evolutionary theory. (64) But this also is the case, mutatis mutandis, for the non-symbolic in Lacanianism. What seems like a view only a simplistic reader of Lacan would make in Chapter One becomes an insightful way to think the limits of Lacanianism in relation to science in the third. But there is a greater issue: Lacan’s claims not to be an ontologist, as Johnston notes, not
because of a false modesty (as if Lacan were ever given to such), or because he was leaving it to others to extend his thought, as he suggests in a 1972 seminar, when he declared “one surely will be found one day to make an ontology with what I am telling you,” but because he was operating within a given area of metapsychology regarding the production through signification of the subject. (12)

Now embedded in that metapsychology, not least through Lacan’s engagement with Heidegger, is an implicit ontology of the subject—one that Johnston admirably and clearly lays out over his last several books—but one must wonder about a materialism that works from within a given account of subjectivity to an account of the real an sich. This, formally at least, is the move of every idealism. In other words, yes, the subject an sich may be riven with incompletions and gaps, but what warrants the broad claim that, from the finitude of the subject, the following is the case:

The time has come to pronounce the true formula of atheistic materialism: there is just a weak nature, and nothing more. All that exists are heterogeneous ensembles of less-than-fully synthesized material beings, internally conflicted, hodgepodge jumbles of elements-in-tension—and that is it. What appears to be more-than-material (especially subjectivity and everything associated with it) is, ultimately, an index or symptom of the weakness of nature, Other-less, un-unified ground of being. (37; my emphases)

Now, of course, the next volume in Johnston’s trilogy concerns this “weak nature,” which will move to explain this in much more detail, but this formulation is constant in Johnston’s work: the subject is not alone in its strife, but rather is an “index or symptom” of a “weak nature,” which is speculatively discovered by looking at subjectivity itself. What, then, provides the ontological impetus for these claims? This problem is what necessitates Johnston’s move to the natural sciences, since by an intellectual division of labour, one can find in the sciences an account of a “weak nature” as he depicts it. “Freudian psychoanalytic metapsychology here contains the nascent potentials for the formulation, in conjunction with select resources from today’s natural sciences, of a conflict ontology, a theory of the immanent-monistic emergence of a disharmonious ontological-material multitude of plurality.” (25; my emphasis) This, as he recognizes, means choosing those scientific results and areas that bolster his ontology. Such choices, are ineradicable to any philosophical naturalism, which often provides a narrative that brackets out the very controversies and debates in which scientific claims about, say, brain plasticity are made. We hence see moves inductively from fallibilist accounts to
determined ontologies. But more pertinently, Johnston seems to reinforce the divisions between the human and natural sciences, arguing that the former should be critiqued by Lacanianism, since they are based on long-disreputable notions of the subject, but that the hard sciences are the pathway to the real. This division, of course, is one favoured by hard scientists themselves, and thus the rush in the social sciences to render themselves unto the Caesar of the natural sciences, further encoding all of human existence in quantifiable data sets as well as constantly spinning on grant reports and the like to prove their fealty to such objectifiability. Hence far from what his prose would suggest, being a scientific materialist is not “brave”—a word he uses several times for those who take on the Continental anti-naturalisms—but is the default frame of contemporary academia. What’s “brave,” I suppose, in psychoanalytic circles, is de rigeur—indeed the very definition of rigour—in academia as a whole, and being foisted on philosophy and like disciplines; thus the sad sight of literary theorists studying neurological reactions to works of literature to provide an empirical basis for their work, or doing quantitative analyses using computers to study Dante.

Moreover he risks reinforcing what he argues new scientific accounts upend, namely the distinction between nature and culture, since the natural sciences would take up the former and psychoanalysis would take up the latter in terms of the symbolization and irreducibility of subjectivity. In Self and Emotional Life, Johnston chastises those who would “pla[y] off an irreducible nonnatural subject, portrayed as a mystery utterly inexplicable in scientific terms” given how the days of scientific mechanism are largely over in the recent literature. (SEL, 207) The latter account of naturalistic mechanism, on loan from early modernity, is very much theological, according to Johnston, since this nature is a big Other “to the extent that it is made into the repository of every possible answer to any query capable of ‘scientific’ formulation.” (22) But despite adhering to a certain account of the biological sciences, in Outcome, he notes that he is not interested in a “scientific” psychoanalysis, which would have the effect of desingularizing the clinical patient and her individual psychopathologies. He writes about this well: I am not in the least bit interested in trying to reduce away without remainder the singularity of more-than-biomaterial subjects...indifferently subjected to treatment as the fungible patients of a replicable clinical framework, system, or method, a poor (and impoverishing) imitation of the natural sciences.” (53; my emphasis) What he calls for, then, is a

double move of, one, supplementing Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis with a naturalist/biological account of the material un-
derpinnings of denaturalized/more-than-biological subjectivity, and two, supplementing the neurosciences with a sophisticated, systematic metapsychology theory of subjects whose geneses, although tied to brains, involve much more than bare organic anatomy. (57)

In other words, we have the “irreducible nonnatural subject” of psychoanalysis that is “utterly inexplicable” in scientific terms—qua “denaturalized/more-than-biological subjectivity,” or, as he otherwise puts it, “a scientifically backed account of the genesis and structure of subjects that comes to evade the grasp of the sciences themselves.” (53) It is true that psychoanalysis needs to take up neuroscience if it wants to be a “materialism” and one should not reduce one to the other, as he argues, but it is notable that this neuroscience upends his Lacanianism only around the edges. Lacan’s notion of prehistory, for example, is jettisoned, though no word is yet given on how this would change psychoanalytic praxis itself—not just the framing of the metapsychology that one presumes would also make it more palatable to those outside psychoanalysis.⁴

Of course, those working in philosophy and the human sciences worry not about quarks and so on, but specifically those scientific accounts that invade or overtake various accounts of subjectivity, however displaced and deconstructed. For psychoanalysis, this has meant a retrenchment, especially in France, which Johnston describes well as simply ignoring what they take to be the invading barbarians of uncultured scientists. (The usual method, which he does not mention, is simply to align neuroscientific accounts with Big Pharma, as in Julia Kristeva.) In any case, where Johnston’s account rises (or falls) is how he can account for the way subjectivity arises out of the material processes he delineates. There are few theorists of Cartesian dualism these days, so let us leave aside that bugbear. (For some reason, everyone writing about neuroscience acts as if Cartesians are all around us.) In contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, there are whole ranges of accounts of the relation of the

⁴ He broaches the topic in SEL, xii–xiv. However his own contribution in that volume is more likely to look for ways in which neuroscience backs up given psychoanalytic insights, while Malabou argues in her section that psychoanalysis will have to be rebuilt from its foundations. Given the larger institutional and social forces aligned against psychoanalysis, showing how it is anything but refuted by neuroscientific research is understandable and, given Freud’s own writings on the neurobiology of his day, in the spirit of Freudianism. But this will lead some readers to find sections relating Lacanianism to recent endeavours in the biological sciences as having a pre-given telos, if not forced altogether.
mental to the physical, none of which posit some substance behind the mental besides naturally describable physical properties. We cannot begin to discuss this field, since it opens onto questions of just what a subject is (for some it is all that we normally think of the mental; for others it is a normative rationality for thought properly conceived, etc.) and what is meant by physical determination and causality. For his part, Johnston opts for a dual-aspect monism:

I am tempted to characterize my transcendental materialism as an emergent dual-aspect monism, albeit with the significant qualification that these “aspects” and their ineradicable divisions (such as mind and matter, the subjective and subjectivity, and the natural and the more-than-natural) enjoy the heft of actual existence (rather than being, as they are in Spinoza’s dual-aspect monism, epiphenomena deprived of true ontological substantiality). (180)

Let us leave aside this reading of Spinoza, since substance in his case is the infinite power of existence as is expressed in the causal relations of physical and mental attributes, and thus the modes are anything but epiphenomenal. The question remains open, though, about the relation of the mental and the physical—one wonders why he is only “tempted” at this point to label the relation one way or another. On the one hand, there seems to be top-down causality from the mental to the physical: “the emergent subjects also come to have significant repercussions for the biomaterial bases that are the necessary-but-not-sufficient aleatory conditions of possibility of their very existences” (57), that is, he calls for thinking dialectically a “bi-directional flow of causal influences between matter and mind.” (26) Or, on the other hand, there is a Spinozist dual-aspect monism where both are inexplicable in terms of the other. (e.g., 180) He ends, in any event, with property, not substance, dualism: a single plane of existence out of which comes a transcendental subjectivity that emerges as “recursive, self-relating structural dynamics of cognitive, affective, and motivational subjectivity—a subjectivity fully within but nonetheless free at certain levels from material nature.” (209) This plane of existence, moreover, is not a One-All of ontotheology, but an incomplete, strife-ridden nature rife with contingency. Such philosophers of mind as Thomas Metzinger, whom Johnston strangely cites approvingly (53), wish to reduce all “subjectivity” to material nature, and the task of like materialists has been to banish all talk of the mental to the obsolescence of what Wilfred Sellars called the manifest image of man-in-the-world, which has been overtaken by science. Now many years after the 1990s “decade of the brain” in the
United States, then, from another angle, Johnston is not on the vanguard pushing forward a neuro-scientific endeavour, but is in fact pushing back against materialist reductionists who take an Ockham’s razor (and who wouldn’t be tempted to, if the alternative was reading Lacan’s dense prose?) to subjectivity and just say that physical processes provide the quickest and cleanest explanations of the mental and indeed culture as we know it. In this battle, Johnston may have more friends among the supposed Continental “antinaturalists” than he seems to believe. All of which is to say that, long after the Lacanian “end of man” in (post)structuralism, Johnston argues against the grain for the implacability of the psychoanalytic subject within the cracks of a materialism that still matters.

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