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Book Review

In Search of a Materialist *Ethics*

Review of Adrian Johnson, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism Volume 2: A Weak Nature Alone*

(Northwestern UP, 2019)

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A Weak Nature Alone is the (sub-)title of the second instalment of Adrian Johnston's tripartite series *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism*. The aim of the *Prolegomena* project is to 'establish the foundations for a new materialist theoretical apparatus' (2013 xi) – which Johnson dubs 'transcendental materialism' – drawing on Hegel, Marx, Lacan, and contemporary analytic philosophy (particularly Anglo-American neo-Hegelianism) in order to provide an ontology (volume 2) and theory of the subject (the yet-to-appear volume 3) that is atheist and science-oriented.

At the end of Volume 1, *The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy* (2013), Johnston left us with a statement of what his transcendent(al) materialism consists in. The somewhat (deliberately) unconventional transcendentalism of his materialism rests on the idea of 'the subject as transcendent-while-immanent vis-à-vis the sole, Otherless plane of lone physical being' (2013: 178). In other words, subjectivity is *of* matter, and cannot (or at least, does not) exist without it, is not something separate from it (in other words matter is a condition of possibility for the existence of subjectivity). Johnston's transcendental materialism is *materialist*, therefore, in the specific sense that it requires subjects to think the real conditions of possibility of the emergence of subjectivity in non-conscious matter (2013: 179). It is transcendental in that it 'affirms the immanence to material nature of subjects nonetheless irreducible to such natural materialities' (2013: 178).

Having cleared the ground with his articulation of transcendental materialism in the *Outcome*, the *Prolegomena's* second volume, *A Weak Nature Alone*, sets out to develop the materialist ontology in which his theory of subjectivity is embedded. The ontology of nature Johnston aims to develop here is one in which 'human subjects can be seen to arise in immanent, bottom-up fashions from nature itself' (2019: xi). In other words, Johnston's project here follows in the footsteps of the work of Engels, Lenin and others to 'rethink the concept of matter' in such a way as to make room for consciousness, to quote Ernst Bloch (1972: 17) on the subject, or, in Isabelle Stengers's words, to explain nature 'in such a way that there would be no absurdity in affirming that it produced us' (Stengers in Bryant, Srnicek and Harman, re.press: Melbourne, 2011: 368).

The axiomatic statement of Johnston's position is offered already in volume 1: 'There is just a weak nature (as conflict-ridden matrices of under-determination), and nothing more' (2013: 5). Johnston argues that the Sellarsian scientific image of reality with which we contend today is one in which discontinuous and contingent events combine to produce dynamics that appear (and to some degree indeed are) lawful and stable, but are (also) inherently conflictual, dynamic, and highly complex. It is this inherent instability of the material real – which Johnston terms 'nature' – that allows what he calls 'non-natural' (subjective, psychological, social, cultural etc.) phenomena to arise. The thesis of ontological incompleteness underpinning Johnston's conception of nature thus brings him into close proximity to not only Žižek, one of his explicit key influences, but also some new materialist thinkers, particularly Karen Barad (2007). Unlike Barad and other new materialists such as Jane Bennett (2010), however, Johnston does not ascribe agency or inherent vitality to matter. Rather, drawing on Hegel, he describes nature as self-denaturalizing in the progression from substance to subject.

Johnston builds his ontology on the basis of in-depth reconstructive interpretations of a range of figures, most notably Hegel (in part 1 of the book), Marx, Engels, Soviet and western Marxist thinkers including Lukàcs, Lenin, and Althusser (part 2), Lacan (part 3), and American analytic philosophers, above all McDowell, Pippin and Cartwright (part 4).

Hegel, the subject of part 1 of the book, is central to Johnston's ontology of nature. Not only the concept of nature as progressively self-denaturalizing, but also the titular concept of weak nature is of Hegelian origin. Weak nature is Johnston's term for the natural world of which modern science presents us with an image: far from the strong Nature with a capital N of many materialisms and naturalisms, among which Johnston counts the Spinozist and Darwinian varieties, Hegelian weak nature is fragmented, transitory, and – at least until we reach the level of organic life and especially the animal organism – remains largely unreflexive. Admittedly, these claims could also be made of, if not Spinozism, then certainly Darwinism if one does not take the latter z- as Johnson, a self-confessed post-Darwinian materialist, seems to – as a fully-fledged ontological monism, but rather as a more regional theory or set of theories concerning the adaptive evolution of life.

Such quibbles concerning the genealogical coordinates Johnson plots here are arguably the result of an underdeveloped analytic distinction between the foundational concepts of 'materialism', 'naturalism', and 'realism' in the book, whose frequent concatenation in formulations such as 'a subjectivist thinker opposed to materialisms, naturalisms, and realisms' (2019: 19) obscures what might be considered to be important and useful distinctions between these terms. 'Materialism', for instance, very often

involves, as it does in Johnston's case, an ontological statement about the constitution of the real, namely that it is in some sense 'made of' matter, whether 'matter' is considered in the nineteenth-century atomistic sense or in the more dematerialized, post-quantum sense of the word. It also often involves a statement about the mind/brain-body relation, though materialism qua metaphysical and/or cosmological theory need not always overlap with or imply materialism in this latter sense (cf. Wolfe, 2020). Meanwhile, though 'naturalism' and 'materialism' typically share the conviction that the phenomena we encounter in the world are amenable to scientific investigation, naturalism need not imply materialism in the strong ontological sense of a theory concerning the fundamental materiality of the whole natural order.

These considerations are significant for Johnston's account of Hegel, whose distinction between the natural and non-natural Johnston takes over, albeit in an emergentist rather than dualist form (2019: 133). Thus, although Johnston's ontology locates subjectivity immanently within the contingent structures of material nature, in its emergence from the latter it is the result of nature's self-denaturalization and is thus not *strictu sensu* natural. The implication that post-natural subjectivity and its products are still material phenomena implies significant overlap between materialism and naturalism here, and positions Johnston's Hegel as essentially a materialist thinker. This might be provocative for some, not only because matter clearly does not occupy a foundational position in Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* (as the subject of 'inorganic physics' in §§ 203–257, matter is treated much more in the manner of a regional *res extensa* within nature), but also because it renders the distinctions between Hegelian absolute idealism and Marxian historical materialism – vigorously disputed not only by Marxists – much less pronounced than they have often historically been.

In many respects, the discussion of Hegel covers ground that those acquainted with contemporary work on Hegel's critical naturalism (Deranty, 2012; Gambarotto and Illetterati, 2020; Ikaheimo, 2012; Giladi, 2014; Laitinen and Särkelä, 2019; Lumsden, 2016; Ng, 2020; Renault, 2012; Testa, 2012; not to mention Malabou (2005) with whom Johnston is in extensive dialogue) will recognise. Much of this scholarship is concerned precisely with tracing the emergence of structures of subjectivity out of pre- or proto-subjective organic life along the lines Johnston draws here. Thus, although Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* certainly *was* largely neglected until recently (2019: xvii), Johnston's work participates in a broad effort to reinterpret it.

Something similar can be said for the treatment of Marx, Engels, and Marxisms in Johnston's book. In recent years, Marxist authors (*inter alia* Foster, 2020; Leslie, 2016; Malm, 2016; Moir, 2020a; Moore, 2015; Saito, 2017) have reappraised Marxist treatments of nature and the natural sciences such that the hostility to the concept of a dialectics of nature is arguably no longer so pointed as Johnston proposes (2019: xviii). Johnston's treatments of Althusser and Lukács also find worthy interlocutors in the form of, for instance, Marc Berdet (2013) and Michael J. Thompson (2019).

Johnston's rehabilitation of a dialectics of nature – consistent with the ongoing revival of Engels that positions him as an ecological thinker of the first order – is balanced by a truly important insight in the book's second part on Marx and Marxisms: that the ideas put forward in Engels' dialectics of nature fundamentally *unite* Marx and Engels against the caricature – at least as old as Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), though only, as Johnston elucidates, partly originating with it – of the 'good' sober-critique-of-capital Marx and the 'bad' metaphysics-of-nature Engels. In

contemporary Marxist scholarship on ecology, one still finds versions of this, for instance in the debate between Moore and Foster on the question of extractivist capitalism's alleged role in producing what Marx called a 'metabolic rift' (over-exploitation of resources that brings the temporal scale of human (re-)production into conflict with that of carbon, water, and other natural cycles). The problem of seeing Marxian and Engelsian materialism as fundamentally opposed on this issue is that it becomes challenging to connect the ecological and social critiques. Johnston's reappraisal of the *Dialectics of Nature* thus arguably does more to rescue *Marx* from the consequences of that book's fate than it does Engels – all the better for an environmentally grounded critique of capital.

Parts 3 and 4 of the book are where Johnston's vision really takes flight. While his critique of strongly anti-naturalist interpretations of Lacan will surely be hotly debated by Lacanians more and less sympathetic to these arguments, readers with less visceral investments in those disputes will also find much to contemplate. Lacan's 'qualified naturalism' (2019: 207) is based for Johnston on his (Lacan's) insistence on the neediness of embodied human existence as demonstrated by the helplessness of the new-born infant. Even if, as Johnston argues, for Lacan processes of 'Imaginary-Symbolic imprinting and overwriting partially denaturalize need', the resulting never fully denaturalized subjectivity 'remains [...] "not without" (*pas sans*) a rapport with nature in the guise of its bio-material body' and is thus stuck 'perpetually struggling with stubbornly indigestible bits and fragments of an incompletely and unevenly domesticated corpo-Real' (*ibid.*). Johnston coins the term 'anorganicity' to describe the state between being the not-yet-fully-subjective organism and the self-conscious (linguistic) subject, and while it is not clear in concrete terms whether only human subjects, prior to our entry into language, or also (some) animal organisms inhabit a state of anorganicity for Johnston, his positioning of the concept as a missing link in the transition from nature to subjective spirit in Hegel's system has much productive potential.

Part 4 of the book returns to Hegel via contemporary Anglo-American neo-Hegelianism. Johnston sees McDowell's 'naturalism of second nature' intersecting with Lacan's not-quite-anti-naturalism (not to mention Lukács' concept of second nature, though that connection is not explored in detail at this point) in that the free, denaturalized subject never fully escapes the determinism of so-called first nature, such that the first is always-already permeated with the second (an idea, as I have argued elsewhere (Moir, 2020b), that we find present already in Hegel and which Johnston (2019: 269) helpfully points out that Marx foreshadows in *Capital*). However, the critique of science as practiced by McDowell and Pippin comes under scrutiny here, with Johnston convincingly arguing that the 'science' with which the aforementioned take issue is something of a straw man: contemporary natural science, particular the 'new science' of complexity, emergence, and contingency that interests Johnston here, does not correspond, he argues, to the reductive and eliminativist vision with which McDowell and Pippin are said to contend.

The account of the relevant debates on offer here is impressive, though it does raise a question: given Johnston's claim that contemporary materialists are and/or ought to be concerned and aligned with natural science, one wonders how Johnston conceives of the specific relation between transcendental materialism and the sciences that he claims must engage in self-critique rather than (only?) being subject to the – to use Johnston's phrase, extra-scientific – criticism of philosophy (2019: 279). To borrow terms

from Adrian Mackenzie and Andrew Murphie (2008), is transcendental materialism intended to take a critical, extractionist, or engaging approach to the sciences? In other words, does it seek to criticise the premises of scientific rationality and practice in the manner of an ideology critique, to use natural scientific concepts heuristically in order to shed new light on aspects of social/cultural/environmental relations, to seek dialogue and collaboration with science, or some combination of these? For the most part, Johnston's – compelling, rigorous – encounter with natural scientific concepts and theories seems to take the latter at their word, which would be consistent with his claim that the residual scientism within the natural sciences should be 'intra-scientifically...undone' (2019: 11). Yet if part of the point of transcendental materialism is not to play a part in this process from without, as it were, then the question of why we need it comes into view.

In the first volume of the *Prolegomena*, Johnston argues that one of the motivating reasons for elaborating his transcendental materialism is a certain kind of scientism that he claims persists because science has been insufficiently de-theologised. He concurs here with Lacan's insight that even an ostensibly atheistic natural science carries within it the traces of theological reasoning, imagery, and sensibility, a fact that gives rise to the idea of 'Nature' as a Big Other – an attractive, if misleading, over-simplification in an age of accumulation-driven climate change. In a claim reminiscent of the one made by Meillassoux in *After Finitude* (2006), Johnston sees our current global conjecture proving the Lacanian thesis that the more science reveals the meaninglessness of the Real, the more fervently people will turn to forms of (religious, political, scientific) authority claiming to guarantee the stability of meaning. Although the precise problem with this is not spelled out explicitly by Johnston, one can conclude that it is this: clinging to the idea of a higher agency outside ourselves, whether a vengeful or benevolent god, a 'Nature' capable of restoring itself to some putatively lost state of equilibrium, an omnipotent 'time' in a Meillassouxian mould, or even a Lacanian 'word' still full of Christian overtones, exonerates us from the need to act, or even deprives us of the idea that action is possible. The aim of transcendental materialism, then, is to purge contemporary thought of every ontotheological ersatz for the dead God that Johnston insists in Freudian-Nietzschean fashion that we must kill again, or perhaps for the first time, in order to be truly free.

The underlying emphasis on freedom in the *Prolegomena* is consistent with its ultimate aim to develop a transcendental materialist theory of the subject, a contribution for which we must await the publication of the third and final volume, even if by the end of *A Weak Nature Alone* its contours are coming into focus. But it also indicates the political stakes of Johnston's project, a theory of the subject being arguably an unavoidable starting point asking not only what it means to know, but how it is possible to act. Thus far such questions, let alone the move from is to ought, are in suspense. If Johnston's trilogy is, as its title suggests, a *prolegomena* to any future materialism, then it may be that we have to wait beyond the trilogy to see what a *politics* of said future materialism might look like.

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