Adrian Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism. Vol. I. The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy*

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Adrian Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism. Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers*

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The Nature whence Spirit came: on Adrian Johnston's Hegelianism

To understand the stakes of Adrian Johnston's philosophical project "transcendental materialism," we must, first of all, be able to grasp the singular inflection of his Hegelianism. This is best accomplished by dividing Johnston's deployment of transcendental materialism in two subsequent phases.

Two phases of transcendental materialism

At first, the expression named a particularly clear and systematic approach to Slavoj Žižek's complex engagement with philosophy, political thought and psychoanalysis. Johnston's second book, *Žižek's Ontology* (2008), subtitled "a transcendental materialist theory of subjectivity," provided what remains arguably the most comprehensive and coherent account of the philosophical stakes of Žižekian thinking today. Limiting its speculative scope to Žižek's own conceptual trajectory, Johnston uses the transcendental materialist perspective as a reading key which allows

him to retrace the Slovene philosopher's foundational step, moving from psychoanalysis back to German idealism, from the Freudo-Lacanian theory of the subject to its ontological underpinnings. It is this preliminary move—from Lacan to Hegel—which Žižek himself characterizes as a condition of his second and defining step, which takes him from this renewed Hegelianism to Marx and dialectical materialism. Following this thread—from Lacan, back to Hegel, then to Marx—Johnston concludes his exposition of Žižek's philosophical project with a twist: "transcendental materialism" turns out to be not only the name of an operator allowing us to retrace Žižek's steps, but also the name of what comes to appear, a result of Žižek's trajectory, as the necessary supplement of dialectical materialism itself, the name of what a Lacanian-Hegelian reading of Marx requires us to add to the dialectical materialist framework.

> Transcendental materialism would be depicted as an arrow moving from a point of departure under the heading "being-in-itself" and crossing over into the area under the heading "thought." But instead of looping back into "being-in-itself" (as in dialectical materialism), this trajectory departing from the ground of the immanent material Real and entering into the space of the transcendent more-than-material Ideal doesn't return to the domain in which its point of departure is situated. There is no going back (Johnston 2008: 275).

Transcendental materialism thus constitutes an "added axiom" to the theoretical space of dialectical materialism—the axiom of the *constitutive and irreversible alienation of subjectivity,* which states that "there is no going back" to being-in-itself—as well as the set of investigations into the consequences of this additive gesture. It is here, in fact, that Johnston's project exceeds the merely exegetical or reconstructive function.

In order to position transcendental materialism as a distinct research program, it is important to consider the difference between the general theoretical space founded by Žižek's work and the philosopher's particular conceptual trajectory within it. The Žižekian theoretical space as presented in the opening pages of *For They Know Not What They Do,* is composed of the "borromean" link of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Hegelian philosophy and Marxist political thinking. The borromean property qualifies the interaction between any two linked "components" by the negative mediation of the third: Hegel with Lacan, but not without Marx, Lacan with Marx, but not without Hegel, and so on (Žižek, 2002: 2). On the other hand, the trajectory of Žižek's particular work, as previously mentioned, (mostly) concerns two specific movements within this broader space: the first, a reading of Hegel's theory of negativity from the standpoint of the Lacanian theory of the death drive; the second, a reconceptualization of Marxist political thinking from the standpoint of this renewed Hegelianism (Žižek 1989: 7).

We have suggested that transcendental materialism first appears as the result of this trajectory, as capitulated in Johnston's creative exegesis of Žižek's philosophy. The product of Žižek's work would be the affirmation that an additional principle must be added to dialectical materialism, the principle of "no return": what the subject loses in order to become a subject is only constituted as a consistent being through this very loss. This principle could also be conceived as a correction of the Marxist philosophical anthropology found in the *Economical and Philosophical Manuscripts*: labor is not a process of exteriorization and constitution of human essence which is then transformed into an irreducible estrangement of man from itself through the intervention of private property. Humans are "generic" in the much more frightening sense that we are always already estranged from our substance, incapable of controlling what we create to the point of producing forms which gain autonomy over us. What the logic of expropriation of labor through private property effectively accomplishes, alienating us from this more fundamental estrangement in the world, is the establishment of a social link based on the ideological fantasy that what has been essentially lost to us previously had such a reality that it could in fact be recuperated—either through further accumulation or through the abolition of the property form. In short, the logic of labor as exteriorization (*Entäusserung*) is retroactively posited by the logic of estrangement (*Entfremdung*), which is the one actually at stake in the relation between man and nature.

But if this new principle already appears at work in Žižek's theory of the subject, Johnston's conceptual effort has been to refer it back to the general theoretical space mentioned above—a move which requires the confrontation with a "step not taken" by Žižek himself: after the move from Lacan to Hegel, and then to Marx, there is still the question of a renewed Marxist approach to Lacan and psychoanalysis. And while the Lacanian return to German Idealism—as examined in *Žižek's Ontology*—presents itself as an investigation of ontology from the perspective of a previous commitment to the irreducible dimension of subjectivity, a "return to Lacan" from the standpoint of Žižekian-Marxism constitutes an inquiry into the analytic theory of the drives from the perspective of a previous commitment to the above-mentioned logic of estrangement, encapsulated in the principle of "no return." Most of the polemics around Johnston's project concerns the formulation of this underlying commitment: in a polemic with Žižek himself, Johnston proposes that only a serious engagement with the natural sciences can truly situate a materialist take on the constitutive alienation proper of subjectivity. The estrangement which characterizes man's relation to nature is conditioned by a theory of nature which thinks the estrangement of nature from itself.

Hegel's philosophy of weak nature

This leads us, finally, to Hegel. As we have seen, both Žižek and Johnston depart from the same question: "What ontology does freedom imply?" (Žižek 2009: 82), a question which directly resonates with Hegel's own affirmation, already in 1796, that "the question is this: how must a world be constituted for a moral entity?" (2002: 110).

But there are two ways to approach this question, either privileging the synchronous or the diachronic aspect of the problem. To approach Hegel (and subsequently Marx) from the standpoint of Lacan's theory of the subject is to frame this problem above all through a theory of already deployed symbolic structures and then to enquire into the material basis of the world of language and the consequences of such materiality in the constitution of subjectivity. To approach this same theory of the subject from the standpoint of a (Freudian-inspired) Hegelian-Marxism is to privilege the historical aspect, framing the issue diachronically and questioning how it is that such a structure could have emerged to begin with. Whereas Žižek takes Hegel's famous "not merely as substance but also equally as subject" as a banner for an ontology that includes the restless force of the negative, Johnston reads it as a permission to enquire into the emergence of this very split between substance and subject out of substance itself—and in such a way that, remaining faithful to Žižek's own project, such a split remains in a certain sense "included" in that out of which it emerged.

Following Johnston's patient reconstruction of this inquiry into Hegel's own philosophical works, let us briefly highlight some important passages which help substantiate this polemical project. Already in the 1796 fragment mentioned above, titled *The Earliest System-Program of German Idealism,* Hegel relates the question of an ontology of freedom to the natural sciences:

> How must a world be constituted for a moral entity? I would like to give wings once more to our backward physics, that advances laboriously by experiments. […] Thus, if philosophy supplies the ideas, and experience the data, we may at last come to have in essentials the physics that I look forward to for later times. It does not appear that our present-day physics can satisfy a creative spirit such as ours is or ought to be (Hegel 2002: 110–11).

It is crucial to note that philosophy is therefore not only conditioned by a theory of subjectivity—which, for Hegel, was political in its origin: the task of producing a general ontology compossible with such a "moral entity" is equally conditioned by non-philosophical practices, namely, physics. Furthermore, Hegel's remarks on science in this passage elucidate important aspects of his position towards the mathematized scienc-

es—usually construed as a categorical (and crude) rejection of formalism and scientific knowledge. Rather than oppose science and philosophy, equating the former with some lifeless form of knowledge, Hegel states that present-day science—that is, Newtonian mechanics and its specific mathematical apparatus—is incapable of providing us with "the data" that could condition our ontology in the same way the French Revolution has supplied us with a new idea of freedom. This is not the position of someone who is against science in any sense, rather it's a quite enthusiastic expectation of a science still to come.

And, in fact, if we consider Hegel's later treatment of "observing reason" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, roughly ten years later, we once again find this same immanent critique of the scientific world-view. In a critique of the "finitist" presuppositions of observing reason, which amounts to saying that science has hypostasized the Newtonian treatment of mechanics as the general form and treatment of every natural phenomena, Hegel states that "even if Reason digs into the very entrails of things and opens every vein in them so that it may gush forth to meet itself, it will not attain this joy; it must have completed itself inwardly before it can experience the consummation of itself" (1977: 146). This need to "complete itself inwardly" concerns the imperative that "any systematic science, as thorough and complete, must include a scientific account of the subject of science, of the observing consciousness responsible for the content of its observations" (Johnston 2012: 121). The apparent hubris of such a critique is toned down when we consider that scientists themselves are today facing this exact question.

> Science has advanced to the point where we can precisely arrange individual atoms on a metal surface or identify people's continents of ancestry by analyzing the DNA contained in their hair. And yet ironically we lack a scientific understanding of how sentences in a book refer to atoms, DNA, or anything at all. This is a serious problem. Basically, it means that our best science—that collection of theories that presumably come closest to explaining everything—does not include this one most fundamental defining characteristic of being you and me. In effect, our current "Theory of Everything" implies that we don't exist, except as collections of atoms. So what's missing? Ironically and enigmatically, something missing is missing (Deacon 2012: 1).

At stake in Hegel's treatment of experiment science is therefore not a general assessment of science's inherently lifeless knowledge of the world, but rather an enthusiastic confrontation with the limitations of science's current development and the eager awaiting for a science capable of thinking life itself. Rather than provide an ontology that would no longer need to be informed by science altogether, he proceeds to anticipate some of the critical conditions that any such ontology will have to

answer to: for example, the status of negativity in freedom, as modern politics has rendered thinkable, or the limitation of the "machine metaphor" when attempting to think the logic of organic forms.

Furthermore, and we will conclude on this point, Hegel does not only criticize the limits of the natural sciences of his time, still (and rightly so) infatuated with the perplexing reach of Galileo's and Newton's achievements, exposing the idealist commitment at stake in the generalization of the formal treatment of mechanic movement to the understanding of inherently circular phenomena such as living organisms. He also extends this criticism to the idea of nature which was born as the counterpart of this subjective stance. In other words, to criticize the idealism of natural science is also to criticize a certain ideal of nature, for it is not only the subject of science which must be included into science, a movement which renders the current scientific view incomplete, but also science which must be included into its object, (in)completing nature itself.

At the end of the second volume of the *Encyclopedia*, in a long commentary added to the paragraph §370 ("Genus and Species"), Hegel (in a manner not unlike Chesterton in his *Introduction to the Book of Job*) suggests that the inadequacy of the classification of species is not so much a sign of a deficit in the classificatory system as it is a quality of life itself, which appears "in the most inadequate forms" (1970: 416). The reason for this, Hegel adds, "lies in the impotence [*Ohnmacht*] of Nature to remain true to the Notion and to adhere to thought-determinations in their purity" (1970: 423).

It is this impotence or weakness that Johnston will single out as a fundamental element in the materialist understanding what sort of Nature could give birth to the more-than-natural. The crucial point here is that Hegel is not defining Nature as structurally negative, in the sense in which Being, in the *Science of Logic*, appears as already split into non-Being—rather, this impotence is a *historical* negativity, an incapacity to prevent what lacks form from gaining form and a form from deforming or transforming itself.

> This impotence of the Notion in Nature generally subjects not only the development of individuals to external contingencies—the developed animal (And especially man) can exhibit monstrosities—but even the genera are completely subject to the changes of the external, universal life of Nature (Hegel 1970: 416).

Such a definition of Nature remains thoroughly materialist insofar as it does not presuppose in Nature a more-than-natural quality that would silently serve as the relevant causal factor in explaining the more-than-natural effects of what emerges therefrom. The Hegelian theory of "weak nature" is Johnston's answer to the problem of how to think the emergence of an irreducible and partially autonomous order, such as the think-

ing subject out of the subjectless world, without having to posit the intervention of a proportionally abnormal force as its cause—of accounting for the more-than-material as a historical *effect* without silently presupposing it in the no-more-than-material *cause*.

The modern recuperation of ontology has mostly taken up the challenging task of giving a step back from physics without falling into classical metaphysics. For example, Alain Badiou's decision to equate mathematics and ontology takes precisely such a form: mathematics, conceived as the theory of the structuring of structures in general, names a region of thinking which grasps a general form of indetermination that is nonetheless compossible with the determinate and specific forms of being-there at stake in the mathematized sciences. Žižek's speculative interpretation of quantum mechanics, albeit shifting the accent away from the formal presentation of physics and towards the concept of *physis* it seems to imply, also seeks to move back from physics into an incomplete or conflicting quasi-metaphysical field of nothingness. From the standpoint of Johnston's project, this "step back" has distinguishable idealist overtones seeing that it endows the infrastructure of being as such with the very quality which ultimately characterizes thinking, so that the very process of thinking matter as being indeterminate or void ends up endowing it with the one property that will render the appearance of the thinking subject a priori commensurable with its prehistory. Against this stepping back from physics into a general ontology, Johnston proposes a step in the other direction, from physics to biology, a move that has the added benefit of being an immanently scientific passage, which concerns physicists and biologists alike, insofar as it thematizes the "historical" problem of the emergence of a heterogeneous formal space out of the homogeneity of what previously existed.

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