

*Prolegomena to Any Future
Materialism: Volume One – The
Outcome of Contemporary French
Philosophy,*

By Adrian Johnston, Evanston,
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There is a peculiar tendency in contemporary philosophy, of young(ish) men in search of their own particular "ism" or "ontology". It seems at times as if you must define your very own version of realism, materialism, naturalism, or other, with some appropriate or at least original prefix (speculative, transcendental, dialectical) in order to place yourself in the order of serious, upcoming philosophers. Quentin Meillassoux has one, Markus Gabriel has one, Ray Brassier has one, now also Adrian Johnston has one – "transcendental materialism". All of the above mentioned are eminent scholars, doing work at the highest contemporary level of thinking, even incorporating insights from the sciences of nature, but nonetheless you cannot help thinking that they are just slightly running ahead of themselves. When you hear Markus Gabriel, for instance, referring to his own "ontology", it is difficult not to hear the voice of Plato or Aristotle,

urging you not to let people under the age of 50 do serious philosophy. Are you really allowed to have *your own* "ontology", when you haven't yet fought, worked, lost, sailed or at least spend some years meditating on a mountain? Why not simply make scholarly work, addressing your audience in an open and critical fashion, without immediately having the urge to define your own particular branch of positions? (I cannot entirely claim not to be guilty of this tendency, myself, but so much the worse).

In his seventeenth seminar, Jacques Lacan said about the need to define people in the terms of their particular "isms" (referring to the distinction between sadism and masochism) that "we are at the level of zoology" (Lacan 1991: 47), when doing this. It is almost as if we are defining the particular fantasy of someone when describing him or her as "a realist", "a naturalist" or "a materialist". "Wow, so you are a realist, tell me about that...". Isn't it in a way like that? Whenever someone is accepted like the proponent of a new kind of "ism", you treat him or her like a particular kind of species, something that might not have been seen before, as if a new kind of being had entered the stage, but nonetheless as something that is safely put into a box next

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to his or her fellow researcher as another exotic species with slightly different characteristics? (Is there even some hidden political truth in this flourishing of particular, individual positions? What is the political economy of “each man his own world view”?)

Adrian Johnston, the transcendental materialist, has published the first volume of his trilogy on the “Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism”. The book is called *The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy* (hinting at Engels’ old *Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*), and it is a massively well written exposition of three important 20th (and 21st) century French thinkers, Jacques Lacan, Alain Badiou and Quentin Meillassoux. Johnston is giving us a well researched and carefully thought out tour of some of the most important thinkers, not just of France, but of the 20th century as such. He is treating them with due respect, as all of them contribute to the position he has himself taken, although he does depart from each of them on the points that he claims to mark their reluctance or inability to accept the full consequences of what one might term the absolute abandonment of religious terminology. The common trait to these three thinkers, according to Johnston, apart from their

indisputable contribution to the on-going atheist materialist revival, is that they are giving in, in some way or other, to idealist or religious traits of thought.

The trilogy, *The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy* and the projected followers *A Weak Nature Alone* and *Substance Also As Subject*, defines Johnston’s position of materialism as one that takes the full consequence of the inexistence of the big Other in Jacques Lacan’s terms. First of all, this position maintains that any, explicit or implicit, adherence to “idealism” or religious forms of thinking is a kind of chickening out. The present volume sets out to identify such traits in Alain Badiou and Lacan himself (and of course, but of much less interest, in Quentin Meillassoux), and in this sense it is a “negative” introduction to the project, “clearing away an opening within contemporary philosophy/theory for the subsequent presentation, in the second and third volumes, of the specific variant of materialism I seek to spell out” (p. xi). Secondly, and accordingly, Johnston wants to define a concept of “weak nature” to replace the replacement of God as the big Other; a nature that is not One and whole, but not-all and marked by fundamental contradictions and ruptures. Thirdly, this concept of nature,

in turn, marks the opening of a materialist understanding of the genesis of (human) subjectivity. A reasonable materialism, as Johnston approvingly quotes Catherine Malabou, “seems to us to be one which poses that the natural contradicts itself and that thought is the fruit of this contradiction” (p. 32). The problem with most of the materialisms and naturalisms, from Diderot to contemporary analytical philosophy, is that they have failed to identify this conflictual nature of nature and therefore remain bound to a form of thinking that is religious, at least in its form, because it reproduces the fantasy of an all powerful and omniscient Other behind the appearances of confusion and contradiction in our comprehension of the world. It might be called Nature instead of God, but as long as it remains whole and all, it continues the religious form of thinking. “God is unconscious”, as Lacan put it – He still speaks through the very grammar of our language. Although this insight is not dramatically novel (the grammatical point about God’s persistence was of course already made by Nietzsche), it does make for an interesting point of departure in Johnston’s critical examination of his predecessors.

In Part 1, Jacques Lacan is praised for both his explicit

endeavours to elaborate a materialist philosophy and for the radical consequences of psychoanalysis that are still to be unfolded. Drawing especially on Lacan’s “Science and Truth”, Johnston makes a very convincing and refreshing argument for the case that the relationship between psychoanalysis and science is not so much a question of whether psychoanalysis meets the standards of rigor, verifiability, measurability, etc. of the natural sciences, but on the contrary: it is a question of what a science would be like that included psychoanalysis. Directly contrary to much of the stupid scientism that prevails, Johnston does not want to reduce questions of mind and thinking to the chemistry or biology of already known scientific language, but to pursue a path recently opened, especially within the life sciences, that allows for a rethinking of matter itself, such that it makes possible a new understanding of the emergence of subjectivity from within it: “... rendering mind immanent to matter requires a changed envisioning of matter paralleling a changed envisioning of mind” (p. 49). Although psychoanalysis is thereby elevated to an event that natural science is only really beginning to catch up with, Johnston does criticise Lacan for not allowing an investigation of

the material preconditions of the emergence of mind, and therefore in effect, one could say, delaying the progress of a nonreductive materialism. This resistance in Lacan is identified partly in his antinaturalist stance towards especially biology and partly in his “Judeo-Christian hangover” (p. 71), which blocks him from escaping the “prison of sacred history” (p. 72), i.e. the still prevailing inability in even progressive, materialist thinking to deal with problems of “ancestrality” (Meillassoux) or “deep history” (Smail). “One always tells fabricated tales at the level of origins”, as Lacan himself said, but Johnston’s point is precisely that natural science more recently has made it possible to open questions of the origin of language and mind, without succumbing to a one-dimensional naturalism of first nature that misconstrues the sui generis character of the mind. It is convincingly shown that “God is unconscious” even in Lacan himself, and although this fact could be interpreted more benevolently in the direction of seeing Lacan’s work as precisely a kind of traversing of a fantasy that does not simply dissolve because of some normative declarations on behalf of brave, new philosophers of realism and materialism, it is a valid criticism, precisely because it nonetheless remains loyal to the

event of Lacanian thinking.

Part 2 takes on Alain Badiou, the second great French materialist of the 20th (and 21st) century. This part is the most interesting and rewarding part of the book, because it deals with fundamental questions of the status of Badiou’s materialism in a careful reading of his two main works, *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds*. Johnston praises Badiou for taking science seriously in a way that is rarely seen in so called continental philosophy and (thereby) also for rendering futile the opposition between analytic and continental thought (p. 82). Nonetheless, Badiou is criticized more intensively than Lacan, because his idealist or quasi religious hangover is not, according to Johnston, a question of resistance or unfulfilled promises, but directly inherent to the very core of his system itself. Badiou’s fidelity to the “Cantor-event” in mathematics that enables him to think an open-ended infinity of multiplicities-without-limits simultaneously marks his stubborn refusal to take on insights gained from other branches of science (again, life sciences are Johnston’s favourite), and it leaves him with an ontic-ontological divide that reserves “true” ontological thinking for the realm of pure being, as opposed to the ontic, the concrete, the living,

the historical. This separation of pure being from the ontic domains of the phenomenal world is Johnston's main issue with Badiou, and his fundamental objection is that Badiou ends up with a gap that cannot be bridged without relying on a pseudoreligious understanding of the event. One could almost say that the coming-into-being of concrete, material existence requires a "leap of faith" in Johnston's reading of Badiou, and instead, he pleads for "ontic impurity" in order to maintain a genuinely materialist philosophy: the phenomenal realm is the only one, but it is not-all, contradictory, etc. Apart from this, to some extent, external critique of Badiou, Johnston (partly inspired by Meillassoux) asks at least two very good and interrelated questions internal to Badiou's own endeavour: First of all, he more or less directly asks a question that is extremely obvious, once you notice it: How does Badiou *not* make a suture, precisely of the kind that he himself warns against, to "one subdiscipline of one formal science" (set theory) when thinking being qua being (pp. 106-107), and secondly: is it possible to imagine another event (in mathematics or elsewhere) that would change the very heart of Badiou's conception of ontology? If it is, then the whole status of *Being and Event* is put in doubt; if it isn't, then the suture

seems absolute.

In Part 3, Quentin Meillassoux is discussed, officially because Badiou himself delegates the question of "decoupling transcendentalism from transcendental idealism" to his student (p. 132), i.e. how to think the appearance of the phenomenal world without recurring to a Kantian-style conception of subjectivity as the a priori condition of its appearance. Therefore, Johnston goes to some length in discussing the much celebrated notions of ancestrality, the Great Outdoors, speculative materialism, etc., but although the clarity of his thought is here maybe even at its most impressive, it does require some basic sympathy for Meillassoux's approach to philosophy to find the discussion seriously interesting (a capacity that this reviewer does not possess – in discussions of ancestrality, I will prefer Schelling's God to Meillassoux's hyper-Chaos any day of the week). The critique of Meillassoux, for instance in his distinction between primary and secondary qualities, is lucid and even somewhat entertaining, but it also drags an eminent scholar of German Idealism and psychoanalysis in a direction that threatens to deflate his philosophical potential a little bit. The two, Meillassoux and Johnston,

apparently share an ambition of developing an “ontologization of Hume’s epistemology” (p. 150), which is supposed to, in Johnston’s version, render the natural realm less deterministic and the human realm less free, at least in the sense of an extra-natural spiritual autonomy that makes humans “capriciously spontaneous” (p. 207). I am sure that Johnston will unfold this argument extremely convincingly and make an essential (and valuable) contribution to the Pittsburgh-Hegelianism that seems to be in the pipeline for the second volume of this trilogy, but one cannot help looking forward to the third volume already, where the entire project might very well be redeemed in what could become a well prepared, rich and highly important rereading of the Hegelian notion of “substance as subject”.

One could criticize Johnston for not entirely living up to his own demands, when he claims that philosophy must take the (life) sciences much more seriously and deal directly with them in order to develop a new materialism that inscribes subjectivity into matter itself. When, for instance, he says that there is “a big difference between arguing for materialism/realism versus actually pursuing the positive construction of

materialist/realist projects dirtying their hands with real empirical data” (p. 173), isn’t he in fact by far mostly on the side of *arguing* for materialism/realism, rather than “getting his hands dirty”? Apart from some relatively superficial references to Catherine Malabou’s (doubtful) combination of Hegel and the brain sciences, Daniel Lord Smail, Thomas Metzinger, and others, we don’t really get into the grind of what it is that provides us with a new opening for a materialism that finally acknowledges the inexistence of the big Other. Maybe this material follows in the second (and third) volume(s), but, slightly paradoxically, I think Johnston in this volume makes a very good case for the immense resources of philosophical argumentation itself.

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REFERENCES

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