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MATERIALISM, SUBJECTIVITY AND THE OUTCOME OF FRENCH PHILOSOPHY

Interview with Adrian Johnston by Michael Burns & Brian Smith
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Adrian Johnston is well known for his work at the intersection of Lacanian psychoanalysis, German idealism, contemporary French philosophy and most recently cognitive neuroscience. In the context of the current issue, Johnston represents the most complete development of a contemporary theory of Transcendental Materialism. In the following interview we explore both the implications of Johnston's previous work, as well as the directions his most recent projects are taking.

Michael Burns: At the 'Real Objects or Material Subjects?' conference you closed your paper with the line, 'materialists and humanists, it's time to unite: the day is ours'. I was wondering if you could flesh out what a 'materialist humanism' would look like in the contemporary philosophical climate?

Adrian Johnston: Since the conference at Dundee last year, I have had a chance to recast what I was getting at with reference specifically to Hegel. In particular to the section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* entitled 'Observing Reason'. One of the things I'm in the process of working out on the basis of these texts, such as the piece I presented in Dundee, is the notion that instead of us philosophically having to impose an external check on the sciences, especially the natural sciences, in order to leave room for some of the things we might be interested in, and which we don't feel can adequately be accounted for within the explanatory methodological frameworks of the sciences, we can, instead, taking a Hegelian dialectical phenomenological approach, argue that at this point one can step back and see the natural sciences themselves developing out of their own resources a sense of their limitations, *vis a vis* the things that, philosophically speaking, we are interested in. We can begin to account for how the sciences, on their own terms, are necessarily incomplete and that they can actually pinpoint the ways in which they're incomplete. Hegel already tries this, when talking about the

emergence of the life sciences out of 17th and 18th century science, going back to Bacon and Galileo, but of course culminating in Newtonian mechanical physics. Hegel points out how these disciplines nonetheless have to rely on formulating their own terms; they develop a distinction between the animate and the inanimate and a notion of life, but they produce a notion of life out of themselves that they thereafter can't contain or can't do justice to. And, of course, the section on 'Observing Reason' famously culminates in the absurd doctrines of physiognomy and phrenology as the example of the last attempt to rein in what these sciences have produced out of themselves back within their own confines. I think that there's something very much along these lines that's going on in an even more striking fashion with the science of the last few decades.

So, to go back to your question: In the final lines, or rather the last few paragraphs, of the piece I presented in Dundee, the idea is that we don't need to feel at this point threatened by the sciences as our adversaries. The old phenomenological or Frankfurt School critical theory narrative about how these disciplines have imposed this reductive levelling down of rationality and that we have to fight this is still very much a part of today's discourse on biopolitics etc. that, to me, is completely wrongheaded and in fact misidentifies what the problems are and fails to realize that even if the individual scientists themselves might be committed to some reductive or eliminative ideology, some sort of crude scientism, that the sciences themselves, and certain scientists of varying degrees of consciousness, are aware that there is this weird kind of dialectical mutation that's occurring in those disciplines that can be productively put to work. Continuing to misrecognize and neglect that internal self-critique perpetuates a false debate that goes back essentially to things like Husserl's complaint about the sciences at the start of the 20th century.

MB: You recently published a paper on the work of Quentin Meillassoux in *The Speculative Turn*, and in the paper you seem to take a critical stance towards the lack of engagement with any notion of social or political praxis in both the work of Meillassoux and others associated with the label 'speculative realism.' Is this a fair assessment?

AJ: I don't think that that's a fatal flaw. I think certainly there can be movement in a socio-political direction. And, of course, the person who comes closest to doing so, I think, is Brassier.

MB: This leads in to a more general question. Do you have any further critical thoughts on the recent turn towards a 'speculative realism' in contemporary philosophy?

AJ: I just finished a piece which I had to write for the folks at SUNY Buffalo, at the Umbr(a) Journal, that involves engaging with John McDowell's version of neo-Hegelianism, and the sort of naturalism he's interested in developing, especially in the second half of his seminal work *Mind and World*. He's an incredibly interesting figure, and I think that for people who have an investment in speculative realism, materialism, call it what you will, he's someone well worth taking a look at. I think more engage-

ment with analytic philosophy would be useful, since that tradition has been working on these sorts of problems for quite some time now, and a number of figures have come up with very sophisticated positions that I think need to be reckoned with, if one is going to talk about issues having to do with realism and materialism. The same is true for analytic philosophy of science. I certainly think that for speculative realism it is not as though its relative lack of engagement with politics or, more broadly speaking, socio-cultural issues, is necessarily an inherent limitation; I also feel there's a lot of implicit background heavy lifting that's done by a number of things having to do with a larger socio-political Zeitgeist. I think you see this come out much more clearly in adjacent figures to the movement like Bill Connolly and Jane Bennett who are at the Political Science department at John Hopkins. It's much more obvious that issues having to do with concerns about the environment, for instance, and that old narrative about human hubris and our excessive Cartesian desire for dominance being part of what's gotten us into the pickle we're in now. I think that a lot of the motifs and the juice, you might say, that's fuelling this at a tacit level goes back to those sorts of social and political issues, but it's not very clearly avowed and critically dealt with within the explicit theoretical framework and texts of the speculative realist movement at this point, as far as I can tell.

Now, this is not a criticism that's unique to me. Both Žižek and Badiou have complained about this as well, and I think that there's a middle path here that needs to be staked out. You have, for instance, the anti-scientism of much of 20th-century continental philosophy, especially with orientations like post-Marxist critical theory where a whole number of epistemological and ontological babies are thrown out with the bath water. The sciences are complicit with these very problematic, lamentable developments in the political and social registers, and therefore they have to be thoroughly critiqued, or we should find a way of sidelining them due to their complicity with a number of socio-political developments in the past century that are indeed to be bemoaned. I think that's too 'all or nothing.' Our options seem to be either an excessive over emphasis on the political that leads to a lot of very contentious, if not outright false, claims about disciplines like the sciences; or, at the other extreme, what I see in some of speculative realism, where issues in epistemology and ontology are dealt with in a vacuum. Again, I come back to Hegel, with his manner of looking at all these things as interlinked moments of each other. He is not necessarily committed to some sort of organic system on the basis of that, but, nonetheless, one very much has the sense of the conjunctual status of these things, how they are co-articulated with each other; or, as Badiou would put it, philosophy as looking at the manner in which its conditions cross-resonate with one another and are involved in constellations of compossibility. That, for me, is a key middle path, whether one thinks of it in Hegelian or Badiouian terms, and I think that you see deviations on either side. Both speculative realism and, for instance, McDowell's Pittsburgh Neo-Hegelianism, represent one kind of apolitical extreme, but something like Frankfurt School critical theory represents a deviation in the opposite direction where everything is political, and politics is so primary that it just blocks out of

the picture very important philosophical considerations, again, of a more epistemological and ontological sort.

I see speculative realism as maybe an overreaction, in a certain way. It is an attempt to go back to being able to do philosophy without always conducting our thought under the shadow of things like the catastrophe of World War II, looking at rationally administered societies, etc.; we realize that, no, there are things here which can't just be lumped in with those sets of considerations and quickly dismissed.

Brian Smith: Do you see this overreaction reflected in the renewed enthusiasm for scientific reduction, so prevalent in speculative realism?

AJ: Yes, absolutely. To me this is a response that is very much conditioned by what came before, in a fashion that is problematic: letting one's position be driven reactively. The key references here that you obviously have in mind would be the Churchlands and the new-fangled version of Churchlandian eliminative materialism as advocated most famously by Thomas Metzinger. Metzinger's 2003 book *Being No One* combines the worst of both worlds, the hyper-technical medieval scholasticism of certain analytic philosophers with the long-winded, hulking-tome presentation of German philosophy. I think that's why the translation of Brandom's *Making it Explicit* was a best-selling book in Germany; it similarly uses this weird combination of those two styles. Brassier, of the speculative realist camp, is clearly the most enthusiastic advocate for that sort of approach, whereas with Hamilton Grant you have a kind of Deleuzianism read back into Schelling, and of course Graham Harman is anything but sympathetic to that sort of scientistic position that Brassier represents. It's still unclear how Meillassoux would come down on some of those things. He hasn't tackled, in the way that someone like Brassier has,what analytics, following David Chalmers, call the 'hard problem.' I would be interested to see him wrangle with it. I have critiqued him for having some implicit assumptions in the background about the mind/world relationship, but we really have yet to see from him, I think, a thoroughly worked-out position on that.

By the way, I realized that I went off on a tangent. One thing I forgot to add to the previous thought is the thing I like about Metzinger: he's aware that we are unable to believe in the eliminative materialism of the Churchlands. Even if you read through the arguments and find them convincing, you are not able to internalize them, to really take on board in a first-person phenomenological sense which feels convincingly real and tangible. The Churchlandian position—that you have to view basically everything that you take to be real as an illusion of folk psychology, and that the only thing to truly exist are just assemblages of physical constituents that function in a certain fashion, like your neurons, and out there in the world there are not things like dogs, cats, mountains, trees, etc. but just this field of material stuff that then resonates with the material stuff you are and that's it—is just not believable. We have a great deal of difficulty really accepting that this is the case; we're still left with our, what you

might call in Kantian terms, transcendental or necessary illusion of much of what we take for granted at the folk psychological level being 'real'. The nice thing Metzinger does is to say that we now have neuroscience to explain why it is that we can't accept eliminativism as true, although it is true. It's one step in advance of the Churchlands because it includes as part of its neurologically grounded account why we can't accept the neurologically grounded account. For me, not only is eliminative materialism a problematic position on theoretical philosophical grounds; it's hardly as though it is the mainstream view of most analytic philosophers of mind. The Churchlands are not the hegemons of that sub-discipline of analytic philosophy. Many continentalists really think the only flavour of analytic materialist philosophy out there is this eliminative variety, and that's just not true. If you look at the neurosciences of the past few decades, a lot has happened. Many developments call into question previous philosophical glosses of those sciences. Especially since the 1990s, new work points towards the neurosciences themselves being non-reductive, being much more spontaneously dialectical, in terms of a dialectical materialism as opposed to a reductive or eliminative variety. And, I don't see that reflected in something like Brassier's stance; I think he erroneously identifies the Churchlands as standing on firm ground, not only philosophically but empirically. At this point, they don't. Really, I think that the eliminative materialist stance is based, at this point, on a very dated prior state of those neurobiological disciplines, and if you take seriously things like epigenetics, mirror neurons, and neuro-plasticity, eliminative materialism doesn't do much justice to these things. Moreover, you have developments at the level of affective neuroscience which are not really containable, I think, within the theoretical confines of the eliminativist stance. And so, for me, I can see why Brassier would want to move in this direction because it's to say: here are where the greatest fears of continental philosophy lie, in this nihilistic reductive materialism, and instead of fighting it off, let's embrace it, and praise this as the culmination of post-enlightenment rational progress. I can see the appeal of that, but I think that the price he pays is that he has to play into false assumptions and images about what the scientific and analytic philosophical options are that are available, and the ones that I think are most promising are not the ones he goes for. But, in his work since *Nihil Unbound*, his turn to the grandfather of Pittsburgh neo-Hegelianism, Wilfrid Sellars, strikes me as intriguing and full of a great deal of potential. I'm very eager to read what Brassier will produce in the years to come.

BS: So you've given us a negative critique of those positions. I want to move on to your positive construction of the subject. But I still want to talk about it in terms of reductionism. You are interested in the idea of the more than material subject as coming from a material base, but also at the same time it is influenced from above, where you draw on the symbolic in Lacan. So the subject is between these two sides. For you, is the subject a point of resistance against two potential reductive strategies: between a reduction to a material base, but also a similar kind of reduction, which would be to say that the subject is nothing more than a component of the social as a whole?

AJ: Absolutely. I fully endorse that reading of what I'm up to, or after, and it's a wonderfully clear and succinct way of translating what in some of my earlier work I've talked about in Lacanian parlance in terms of the subject as occupying a point of overlap between points of inconsistency within the registers of the Real and the Symbolic, in that you have corresponding to Lacan's barred big 'O' Other in terms of the internally inconsistent symbolic order, you also have at the same time this barred Real, which would be the idea of the internal inconsistency, in this case, picking up on only select facets of the Lacanian Real, that material *an sich* is itself inconsistent. It's thanks to the meeting up of these two points of inconsistency that you have the fullest most robust sense of subjectivity that I think is very much at stake in Lacanian and post-Lacanian variants of materialism.

BS: So, to move on from that. What I want to ask now is broadly how do you sit in relation to someone like Graham Harman, or Bruno Latour. What is the emphasis that you place on the human subject, specifically? By that I mean, if we see the subject as coming from a material base but also being conditioned from above as well, what's to stop us extending this into a series of levels, above continually and down below. Not exactly like, but similar to Harman or Latour, these levels are black boxes, when we open up each box in the level below we find our material base actually has its own subjectivity which has its material base, and we're the overdetermining aspect of it. What's to stop us taking levels above and below and extending it into an infinite series, and entering into a more, maybe, object orientated realm?

AJ: My answer will be very provisional; it's one of those questions that forces me to shoot from the hip, and those are the best ones.

I think that one of the key differences is that part of what I'm after, and this is one of the things that I take from Žižek, is a commitment to the German Idealist traditon. If one wanted to paint in the broadest of broad brush strokes, one can say that the lowest common denominator of Kantian and post-Kantian German idealism is this notion of autonomous subjectivity, and, of course, this philosophical tradition sees itself as the cultural codification and consolidation of the French Revolution, among other things. This emphasis, then, on freedom as absolutely privileged is something which I very much agree with, and in this case, of course, there's a real tension between myself and the background that I come out of (involving, among other things, German idealism as well as Žižek's thought) and someone like Harman; one of the things that is clearly part of the agenda of the wing of speculative realism that he represents is this anti-anthropocentrism, this wanting to argue against human privilege: we're not exceptional we're just a certain weird set of objects amongst others and so on and so forth. Going back to Mike's question, with which we began, I explicitly endorse the emphasis on the peculiarity of the human that goes back to Pico della Mirandola's C15th *Ode to the Dignity of Man* and look at that as really the earliest precursor of the certain aspect of the theory of subjectivity that I wish to defend, and I do think that there is something

odd, exceptional, whatever adjective you wish to use, about us. In fact, for me, we're so strange that to do justice to the sorts of subjects that we are requires modifying our more global picture of being or nature, in order to consider ourselves as immanent to it.

That, or course, sets me very much at odds with the object-oriented camp in that I think that we are exceptional, and that we are exceptional in a way that has to do with freedom, with the fact that weird structures of reflexivity or recursion are very much an essential part of the structure of our subjectivity in a way in which prevents us then being collapsed down to a flat plane within which we're just arrayed with other objects, with no acknowledgment or concession that there is some sort of fundamental difference-in-kind, or some sort of free-standing status that is established that makes a subject something which can't just be considered an object. That, I think, is absolutely essential to my approach. This insistence, then, that autonomy is a key component of subjectivity, albeit an autonomy that is immanently emergent out of this level of being, or matter, or even objects, that then comes to establish itself as thereafter a sort of self-grounded auto-reflexively relating set of structures or processes, which you can't do full justice to if you don't recognize the kind of self-enclosure that is established in the constitution of the subject out of this pre- or non-subjective background--that to me is the big difference between myself and someone like Harman. As I might put it somewhat provocatively, I'm just not enough of a self-hating human. It's what Freud would call moral masochism. I recently wrote an extended critique of Bill Connolly's immanent naturalism and Jane Bennett's vital materialism. With both of them, their ecologically-informed political stances drive their anti-humanism, their new version of what was already part of French philosophy with figures like Deleuze. For Hegelian reasons, I believe, as Hegel famously puts it in the1807 *Phenomenology*, one always has to think of substance also as subject, something that the Spinozism embraced by Connolly and Bennett deliberately avoids and forbids.

BS: That affirmation really reminds one of Sartre. I was wondering to what extent there would be an agreement between you and Sartre? When I read the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, the main point that Sartre returns to endlessly throughout both volumes is how there is no *group* subject. The individual is never dissolved within a group. Would you agree with that, as Sartre does, in the sense that it's just structurally impossible for that to happen or would you perhaps argue that it's a real threat that the subject faces and has to resist?

AJ: I am initially tempted to try and find a way to have my cake and eat it too, with regards to the two alternatives that you propose. One thing I greatly appreciated about the event at Dundee was that Sartre came up several times. There was a recognition that though he had fallen out of fashion for quite some time among the Anglo-American world of scholars interested in French philosophy, where Sartre really was deemed passé in part because, I think, he was seen to be too close to more traditional conceptions of subjectivity, going back to the modern period, which he's unapolo-

getic about. His emphasis on radical freedom was considered to be too voluntarist, decisionist, etc. I'm delighted to see that interest in his work is reviving. Badiou wants to combine the figures he identifies as his three French masters: Sartre, Althusser and Lacan--with Lacan already trying to combine aspects, arguably, of Sartre and Althusser, even if Lacan was not always aware of being up to that, in those terms. I'm very much in favour of struggling toward some way of integrating those two sides, and a lot of my own work is striving for that sort of rapprochement between what Sartre represents, on the one hand, and what Althusser represents, on the other. Badiou does an admirable job of attempting to construct a theory of subjectivity at the intersection of those figures, and I appreciate some of the more Sartrean sides of him which often draw criticism. But, I've defended that part of his project in print. I am very sympathetic to the project Peter Hallward, another speaker at the Dundee event, is working out under the heading of «dialectical voluntarism,» which involves, among other things, reactivating Sartre and emphasizing the more Sartrean side of Badiou as crucial today. But, on the one hand, I think there are certain dimensions of subjectivity that are structurally irreducible to trans-individual group level phenomena or processes, in the way that you articulated it as per the first alternative of the two you presented me with in your question.

Also, I think that even if there's something there that's ineliminable, nevertheless, especially at the level of our experience of ourselves, in our practices, there can be the threat of, at least experientially, irreducibility being occluded, lost from view--a sense of dissolution or of being leveled down, reduced away, taken up without remainder into these non- or anti-individual matrices. I think that's certainly a danger and a lot of how we position ourselves could be seen as a reaction to that threat. Even if it can't, in the end, just do away with it structurally, it can so eclipse it from view that de facto it might as well, for all intents and purposes, be an elimination along those lines.

In the background are some dawning problems with different uses of the word «subject.» There's a great deal of work to be done in terms of disambiguating certain terms that have been made to carry so much weight and have been loaded with so many different significations and connotations that sometimes we end up in debates with each other that are false debates, I think. For instance, the Badiou-verses-Žižek debate about subjectivity is a false conflict that's based upon the fact that you have different parties using the word «subject» in different ways, and that if you start doing some labour of disambiguation you realize that there's not necessarily the impasse or direct conflict that's seen to be there, when we were fighting this semantic tug-of-war over this single word. So, this is as much a call to myself as to anyone else, since I use figures like Badiou and Žižek together, and draw on other resources and other traditions that speak of subjectivity. I do think we're going to have to begin doing some labour to take that single word and tease out of it the different levels and layers that have been compressed into it. Hyper-compression has created, in some cases, false problems. We shouldn't be spending our time mired in these false debates, but, instead, figuring out where the genuine bones of contention lie.

BS: So, for example, the way that you discuss the subject in Žižek and Lacan is closer to the individual in Badiou's philosophy as opposed to the subject?

AJ: Yes, although both Slavoj and I are very adamant that one of the things that's missing from Badiou is that you have the stark contrast between, on the one hand, the individual, the mere miserable human animal, and, on the other hand, you have the post-evental immortal subject that's faithful to a given evental truth cause. There's this missing third dimension in Badiou, which would be what Žižek is after in many cases when he talks about subjectivity in terms of the Lacanian subject as a radicalization of the Freudian death drive, which itself captures what the German idealists were after, especially Hegel, when speaking of negativity. For both Žižek and myself there's a lot that's involved in this third dimension, which makes possible the shift from the mere creature wrapped up in interests of self-preservation, of pleasure, etc., and the possibility of what Badiou speaks of as subjectivity, this thorough-going fidelity that breaks with that animal background. Staking out that middle ground as what Žižek has called a vanishing mediator between these different dimensions is important to me.

MB: My next question has to do with the notion of emergence. I've seen you critique both Badiou and Meillassoux on different fronts. Your critique of Meillassoux seems to be, and this is a critique that Hagglund levels as well, that his account of the emergence of life from materiality is problematic for multiple reasons. In the same way you critique Badiou for his notion of the grace of the event. I wonder how much your critiques hinge on the latent religiosity of the terminology utilized by both Meillassoux and Badiou?

AJ: There are two different critical strata that I'm playing with here. I think, to begin with, you could strip out my obvious resistance to religion, you could strip that out of my critiques of both figures, and there would still be core arguments against their positions. For example, concerning the Meillassoux piece in the *Speculative Turn*, for me the real heart of the critique has to do with looking at the explanatory price to be paid for endorsing his ontology of hyper-chaos, just at the level of philosophy of science. As I put it in this recent text on McDowell, which involves some additional embellishments on my critiques of speculative realism, the price is, in my view, too high. What you have to accept in terms of what you allow for at the level even of scientific practice, and the theorizations based on that practice, strike me as yielding instances of *reductio ad absurdum* that problematize Meillassoux's initial position. I do weigh it out in a way that stands on its own apart from considerations of, you might say, religious and, by extension, political upshots of some of his positions. Now, at the same time, given my increasingly Hegelian sensibilities, what I demand of myself and others is that one keeps one's eye on what might be the unintended reverberations beyond one's immediate concerns. Let's say that one is just zeroing in on a certain set of epistemological and ontological issues having to do with the philosophy/science relationship. That's a good and important project. But, I think at the same

time one has to be sensitive about how these things are inseparably interwoven with each other; that there are social and political dimensions that are part of the context that you're looking at. And, you can ignore those issues, but I think that it enriches one's own work, and it's also being intellectually responsible, to keep one's eye on, at least peripherally, the sort of halo of surrounding issues, topics, and areas where there are inevitably going to be reverberations, consequences etc. This is where I say that even though Meillassoux is often compared to Lenin, and especially Lenin's 1908 *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, by contrast Lenin does do that. In fact, if anything, what he's often criticized for in that text is his brutal crudeness when handling the history of philosophy. Just on strict philosophical grounds, one can't comfortably endorse some of his readings of the relationship between the different figures of the modern period and how he positions Berkeley, Hume, Kant, etc. in relation to each other. But, it's not an ignorant crudeness; it is a calculated crudeness. To put it in Badiouian parlance, Lenin is wanting to force certain decisions to be taken in the face of points (as that word is used in the *Logics of Worlds*) so as to eliminate any possibility of fence-straddling--and to do so with an eye to the situation of philosophy in his time as very much bound up with its wider conjunction. And, I think that this Hegelian-Marxist approach is something to which I remain faithful, to use Badiou's language again.

I know that Meillassoux wrote *Divine Inexistence* as his dissertation before *After Finitude*; I wrote the piece in the *Speculative Turn* that you refer to about two or three years ago. I was only dimly aware of the *Divine Inexistence* project through this article that he published in the French journal *Critique*, which had this talk of the God-to-come; for me, my critique, even of the religiosity, is not at all undercut by someone who would point to it and say 'Oh well he was already interested in this divine inexistence material'. The apparatus of *After Finitude* contains polemics against fideism, against much of what we readily recognize as involved in this revival of the religious within the continental philosophical tradition. One can point to his dissertation, but I don't think that just because he wrote *Divine Inexistence* before *After Finitude* that his theses fit together well; I think there's an internal tension there.

MB: Do you think that it's your specific engagement with the sciences that differentiates your account of how a more-than-material subject emerges from materiality from the accounts given by Badiou and Meillassoux, for the emergence of events or life? In really simple terms, there seems to be a similar structure happening there.

AJ: Yes, there's this similar structure, although Badiou refuses to tie his version of materialism to the natural sciences and Meillassoux has yet to expand upon his views regarding subjectivity. . You've heard me use this line before, so pardon me for repeating the over-used, over-paraphrased Churchill one-liner: I think the empirical experimental sciences of modernity are the worst basis for constructing things like theories of subjectivity *except* for all those others that we've tried from time to time. Along these

lines, Brassier is one of my closest fellow travellers in that both of us are adamant that modern science is not something to be held warily at arms length or even aggressively checked externally from the standpoint of philosophy; he and I agree that, instead, we need to, as many of the analytics have done, embrace the sciences, really accept that they are a fundamental part of our *Weltanschauung* and seek in them resources as opposed to problematic points to be resisted, criticized, rejected, etc. For me, the balancing act of my position, where I think it represents an alternative, is that, on the one hand, it involves concurring with Brassier that there is something fundamental about the sciences and that the progress we make in those disciplines cannot be ignored save for at the price of some kind of irresponsible intellectual bankruptcy; but, on the other hand, I don't think that those sciences necessarily produce, in fact I think they point in the opposite direction, they don't produce a reductive picture where everything can be explained from within the sciences themselves. I think that the sciences are showing how you can scientifically explain why everything can't be explained scientifically, as it were. This goes back to that Hegelian phenomenological gesture in the section on 'Observing Reason' in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that the sciences produce out of themselves, on their own grounds, an internal delimitation of their explanatory jurisdictions. You can say that you have an empirical explanatory ground for why an empirical experimental approach can't account for everything that you're after, which is different from just dogmatically insisting what ultimately would have to come down to a kind of *a priori* theoretical dogmatism, a sort that I don't think is very defensible, for example, simply saying, "No, there's this dimension which can't be reduced down to that level and that's it." I think that to have a scientific account for why you can't reduce everything to the sciences is a way to get what you want, for instance, to keep what, I will concede, for instance, religion, various kinds of theological approaches are describing, things that are there, I think, albeit in a very distorted form or in a kind of dualistic or anti-reductivitst stance. I think you can get all of that without having to fall back on what, in my view, are very shaky, a priori, foot-stamping, fist-banging sorts of postulates or insistences that are threatened by the sciences. My position sounds like having your cake and eating it too, but I do think that there are good scientific supports for the idea that a subject that is not itself capturable by the sciences emerges out of what the sciences are looking at, and I think that those disciplines themselves are providing the resources for that account, which I seek to harness in this very Hegelian way too, of stepping back and just allowing those disciplines to unfold their own resources and then, as Hegel put it, recollecting the results. But, of course, the picture that emerges is different from what a lot of people who aren't sympathetic to this approach would think, which is that in the end you're still going to fall into something like eliminative, or reductive materialism. I don't think so.

BS: So, you think, in a sense, this divergence that you get between the subject's actual behaviour and our explanation of that behaviour, via the best current scientific model, can be given a positive account? We are not limited to a simple negative account of

this divergence, in terms of the weaknesses or flaws of our current, incomplete, science? This irreducibility can be accounted for in a positive sense, and that's the role of philosophy, to try and give a positive account of the way in which science and subjectivity will never completely coincide and merge?

AJ: Absolutely.Even though Badiou and I disagree about the nature and status of the sciences and scientificity, nonetheless, in terms of certain aspects of my approach, I'm deeply indebted to him. I come back to this idea of philosophy's role as putting certain of its conditions in cross-resonating relationship with each other and exploring their compossibility, and so one of the features of my work that sometimes gets more attention than others is the fact that I draw on resources from the natural sciences generally, and the life sciences especially. For me, it's never just a matter of fixating upon those disciplines, it's about trying to see how those disciplines become self-sundering, reaching this point where they're beginning to demarcate their own boundaries. That calls for work from other sides too., How are certain resources from philosophy, psychoanalysis, political theory, etc. necessarily part of this picture as well, and how do we then start constructing the links between those different domains and developments? That's very much what I'm after. There are important contributions that, for example, a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework brings. It's not that we have to, in a one-way fashion, rework Lacanian psychoanalysis, rework the various philosophers and philosophical orientations that I'm talking about, due to these sciences. It's also an issue of asking: how do we have to modify these sciences, or how would their research programmes have to alter, in light of key contributions from philosophy and psychoanalysis? The sciences have, in some cases, vindicated us, and it's not just a matter of us having to make concessions to them; that's part of the rhetoric I was deploying at the end of my talk last year in Dundee. The dialectical sword slices both ways. The sciences have reached the point where they are going to have to accept that their interpretations of their data and their research programmes require significant modification in light of the contributions, for the past two centuries, we've been making on the philosophical side of things.

BS: Isn't one of the deepest ways in which that comes out is that for any reductive programme in science, and some other traditional approaches in science, there is the fundamental belief that the Real, or Nature, is in some sense consistent. Whereas what you've always been talking about, in the psychoanalytic aspect of your work, is precisely that the Real, or Nature, or whatever you want to call it, is not consistent, and it's that which is going to be the fundamental shift from the point of view of science in its relation to philosophy.

AJ: Yes, and there's a lot of work to be done in this regard. In addition to McDowell, one of the other key figures who features in a piece I recently finished is the London School of Economics' philosopher of science Nancy Cartwright. I think her work is very important. She's published a number of books, but the text that is really invaluable for my purposes, although it builds on earlier work of hers, is the 1999 book *The*

Dappled World: A Study in the Boundaries of Science. On the basis of considerations internal to much more analytically orientated philosophy of science, she argues for a vision of Nature as a de-totalized jumble of constituents that are not bound together by some sort of seamless underlying fundamental unity. She pleads for that very much on strict philosophy of science grounds, claiming that if you're an empiricist and realist, then the weight of the evidence should lead you to gamble in the opposite direction, not to invest your faith in what is a metaphysical article of faith regarding the ultimate unity, homogeneity, and seamlessness of reality, its reducibility to basic fundamental laws. Keep in mind that this is an article of faith that in practice is unprovable, even if all humanity for the rest of our existence were to spend its time crunching data; we would never get to the point where we would be able to take just a one-minute slice of the behavior of a mid-sized perceivable organism, like another human being or even a smaller animal, to reduce everything down to, say, the quantum constituents of this organism, and then to show that there's a seamless linkage that flows from the base up to the more complex aggregate levels that proves reductionism is right. Reductionism is a metaphysical article of faith, it's a gamble, it's a hypothesis. Even though a lot people want to be realist about it, at it's strongest it's just what Kant called a regulative ideal, and what he calls specifically in the *Prolegomena* the cosmological idea of reason as a regulative ideal for natural scientific practice. It might be a good heuristic device and I think it does have its value, at that level, but I think that one shouldn't mistake a good heuristic device for a solid basis for an ontology. I think we're much closer to what Cartwright calls "the dappled world" or what you point to, for which I use Lacanian and Badiouian language, when I speak of this not-One, non-All nature as our best picture of nature. I think that there are both psychoanalytic and philosophy of science considerations that show that there is better evidence for Cartwright's dappled world, or for the de-totalized real of Lacan and Badiou. There's even better evidence just looking at the state of the sciences and their historical achievements and lack of achievements than there is for the old reductivist dogma.

BS: Isn't this the reversal of the standard interpretation of the consequences of Gödel's incompleteness theorems? The orthodox response has been to affirm consistency at the expense of completeness, as opposed to affirming completeness at the expense of consistency, due, mainly, to equating inconsistency with incoherence?

AJ: That's right. A colleague of mine here, Paul Livingston, who is a person who does very interesting cross tradition work between the analytic and continental, has a book coming out entitled *The Politics of Logic*. The two main figures he discusses are Wittgenstein and Badiou. In addressing Badiou, Livingston goes back to how Gödel condenses in a very clear way this fundamental set of alternatives involving consistency: you have consistency but at the price of completeness. The alternative that you point to he very clearly lays out. We've had conversations about this, and he even noticed in some of my earlier work I run the terms «inconsistency» and «incompleteness»

together, and that's something I'm in the process of rethinking in the light of his work, because he did a lot of work in mathematics and analytical philosophy and logic, and he's now turned his attention to Badiou. If you're also already sensitive to these issues in terms of these sets of alternatives that are forced upon us with a real reckoning with Gödel, I think that this work by Livingston will be quite good. Livingston quite rightly identified that I tend to go for exactly what you were talking about there: a totality that is an inconsistent totality. That's very much what I'm after, and, of course, it's what you have in Hegel and Žižek as well, I think; you can see a definite chaining together of positions in terms of a chain of equivalence that represents something fundamental to our approaches despite whatever other differences you might isolate.

MB: We're curious to ask where you see philosophy going in the next few years, with particular reference to how both European and Anglo-American philosophers are returning to Hegel and idealism in general, as a general resource. What do you see as the crucial philosophical questions for the current generation?

AJ: I've got to say I think this is one of the most exciting times to be in philosophy, despite, of course, the job market. You have the combination of absolutely brutal practical circumstances of the most depressing sort, but simultaneously some of the most promising work being done alongside this, in these circumstances. As critical as I am, for instance, of certain aspects of speculative realism, or other recent orientations, nonetheless I'm delighted to see these things happening. There's a greater awareness of serious problems that were eclipsed from view due to certain dominant trends and obsessions in much of what counted for continental philosophy, especially in the Anglo-American world, throughout a good portion of the middle to late 20th century. In large part thanks to Badiou and Žižek, there has been a really interesting break with the phenomenological and post-phenomenological developments that held such sway, and were so glaringly front and centre in terms of English-speaking work, in continental philosophy. What's followed holds out the promise for a number of different new alliances between the kind of philosophical traditions we come out of and fields such as the sciences, but also, of course, analytic philosophy. One of the things that causes the analytic and continental traditions to separate from each other and become opposed stances is the disputed status of Hegel's philosophy. In the beginning of the 20th century you have Russell and company in reaction to the excesses of late 19th century British Hegelianism: they reject Hegel completely, utterly break with him, in the same way that Descartes did with the scholastics. For most analytic philosophers who are around even today, their history of philosophy training involved going as far as P. F. Strawson's Kant and then leaping over everything for about a century and landing with Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein at the start of the 20th century, maybe a little Meinong before that, but that's it. And, of course, Hegel was cut out of that picture. For all my reservations about Pittsburgh-style Neo-Hegelianism, I see it as one of the most promising developments in terms of overcoming analytical/continental divides involv-

ing using Hegel as providing a *lingua franca* in which we can begin having conversations with each other that we haven't been able to have up until this point, given that the continental tradition is so deeply indebted to Hegel and to what he opens up in a number of ways. I'm very interested in reaching out and engaging with figures on the analytic side. One of the problems I have with a lot of speculative realism is, again, the people interested in it have not had any exposure or any serious sustained exposure to the analytic tradition, and therefore fail to realize what resources are out there in terms of people who've been working on the realism/anti-realism problem, issues having to do with scientific law and the status of causality, etc. You have just this wealth of material that's yet to be fully tapped and that would allow for a lot of cross-fertilization.

One of the things I hope that's going to happen is that the younger generation of people working in continental philosophy will be able to begin dissolving these long-standing disciplinary divides, not just by simply continuing to present the material they've been doing, but dipping into the wealth of material, the resources that are there, for instance, in the analytic tradition. That idea of bringing the strengths of both sides together is one thing I'm very hopeful for and that I'm now beginning to try to do myself in a more sustained fashion.

MB: Thus far your own work and your two most recent manuscripts have been focused on Zizek and Badiou, and I think something that's differentiated your work from other people writing on Zizek and Badiou is that in both of these works a position seems to emerge that's neither Zizek or Badiou but rather your own position and your own sort of constructive work. So where is your research and your project going, and what can we expect to see in the future from Adrian Johnston?

AJ: At this point, I'm writing the second volume of a two-volume materialism project. The first volume is entitled *Alain Badiou and the Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy: From Lacan to Meillassoux*, casting Badiou in the position of Feuerbach *à la* Engels' 1888 *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. Volume one is a kind of ground-clearing operation. I hope I've already settled my debts with Žižek, who, of course, I feel very close to in certain ways. But there are other figures, who I consider to be intellectual neighbours in relation to whom I feel very proximate and yet disagree stringently with on certain key points; these others are Lacan, Badiou, and Meillassoux. So, I settle my differences with them in the first volume as a way to set up the second volume, which is where I delineate what I'm after in its fullest form in terms of what I call transcendental materialism.

It will probably take me about another year to complete the second volume. Another forthcoming project is this book I co-authored with Catherine Malabou, which is now entitled *Self and Emotional Life: Merging Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Neurobiology*. My portion of that involves looking at the vexing Freudian-Lacanian problem of affects in relation to the unconscious and re-evaluating that in light of the resources of contemporary affective neuroscience. Those are the things that are on the chopping block.