



## **Adventures in Transcendental Materialism Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers**

By Adrian Johnston

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### **Author Q&A with Adrian Johnston**

Asked by Graham Harman, *Speculative Realism* series editor

**Graham – Your title contains the phrase “transcendental materialism.” There is a tension between these two words that in some sense drives all of your intellectual work. “Transcendental” generally refers to a sort of philosophy, like Kant’s, that asks about our conditions of knowing the world rather than about the world itself. Meanwhile, “materialism” has always been a philosophy that turns in the most hardnosed fashion towards the world itself, viewing humans as a material thing just like everything else. Stated briefly, how does one reconcile the transcendental and materialist standpoints?**

**Adrian** – The tension between the two terms “transcendental” and “materialism” indeed lies at the heart of my work overall. To begin answering your question with some very broad brushstrokes, I am committed to two foundational claims as motivating philosophical intuitions. First, everything that truly exists is or arises from (and, in all instances, remains situated fully within) nature *qua* ensembles of material beings and happenings as themselves, at least in principle, accessible to being handled by the natural sciences. Second, subjectivity as conceived of within Kantian and post-Kantian German idealism (as per Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel) is a real feature of being too, with this subject amounting to a set of non-epiphenomenal structures and dynamics immanent yet irreducible to material substances (and, as such transcendences-in-immanence, human subjects are, in important respects, not “just like everything else” material). Obviously, the first claim is materialist and the second transcendentalist. Transcendental materialism preliminarily could be

characterized as a single theoretical framework or system based on a synthesis of these apparently incompatible commitments.

The interval between transcendentalism and materialism understandably looks to be an insurmountable gaping chasm (and, hence, the label “transcendental materialism” an oxymoronic absurdity) if one assumes that the transcendental is the exclusive purview of transcendental idealism *à la* Kant and his various progeny. Then, of course, it seems to be the case that any and every philosophy self-identifying as transcendentalist would have to limit itself to putting forward some permutation of a subjectivist epistemology, namely, a theory of knowledge and its conditions of possibility anchored exclusively in human mindedness, devoid of firm ontological investments, and opposed to robust realisms and materialisms. But, for reasons both historical and philosophical, I deny that Kantian (or, for that matter, Fichtean) transcendental idealism possesses a copyrighted monopoly on the transcendental.

Historically, this first becomes visible with the post-Fichtean phase of German idealism inaugurated with Hölderlin’s 1795 “*Über Urtheil und Seyn*” (“On Judgment and Being”) and 1796’s “The Earliest System-Program of German Idealism” (its authorship remains a matter of dispute, with Hölderlin, Hegel, or Schelling each being a possible author—regardless, it expresses a set of convictions shared amongst this Tübingen trio at the time). This phase unfolds under the banner of a “Spinozism of freedom.” Transcendental materialism is, in part, a reactivation of this agenda, with the tension between “transcendental” and “materialism” precisely mirroring that between “freedom” and “Spinozism” respectively. I read Schelling’s and Hegel’s developments of objective and absolute idealisms, themselves generated out of immanent critiques of Kantian and Fichtean transcendental idealisms, as demonstrating, among many other things, that a rigorous, consequent, and thorough transcendentalism cannot remain within the confines of anti-realist, anti-materialist subjectivism. Arguably, both Schelling and Hegel retain key aspects of transcendental subjectivity *à la* Kant and Fichte while, nonetheless, showing why and how this subject, as a set of possibility conditions for knowledge, must itself be accounted for and grounded in a theory of being(s) furnishing the possibility conditions for this very subject and its knowledge as real/true (what one might identify as a meta-transcendental ontology necessarily accompanying a transcendental epistemology). For Hölderlin, Schelling, and Hegel (as well as such contemporaries as Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel), one of the most profoundly dissatisfying features of Kant’s and Fichte’s idealisms is that the transcendental

subject appears to be left frictionlessly spinning in a deontologized void (to paraphrase John McDowell), mysteriously floating in an unexplained vacuum.

In particular, the philosophies of nature elaborated by Schelling and Hegel already point towards a type of anti-reductive (quasi-)naturalism, one including the idea of more-than-material/natural subjects, essential to both dialectical and transcendental materialisms from Marx and Engels through Žižek and myself. Relatedly, I view the “hardnosed” varieties of materialism you have in mind here (such as mechanistic, reductive, or eliminative materialisms, themselves akin to McDowell’s “bald naturalism”) as “contemplative” in the sense incisively criticized in the first of Marx’s eleven “Theses on Feuerbach”; of course, in 1845, Marx has in view both the hybrid Newtonian-Spinozan *Weltanschauung* of the eighteenth-century French materialists as well as the philosophical anthropology of Feuerbach. In line with the speculative dialectics of a post-contemplative materialist standpoint, I consider exclusions of an account of subjective spontaneity (even if such spontaneity is taken to be somehow illusory) at the levels of epistemology and/or ontology to be indefensible for any and every materialist, even the most hardnosed. The entire first part of *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism* (i.e., Chapters One through Four) explains and defends this line of thought.

Philosophically, if transcendental arguments involve reverse-engineering out of a given phenomenon its necessary conditions, then I see no reasons why only subjective idealists fixated on epistemology, and not also realists and materialists concerned with ontology, can help themselves to such arguments. I start from the two intuitions lying at the base of transcendental materialism I mentioned at the outset of my answer to this question. The transcendental argumentative strategy specific to my research program is to extrapolate out of the experience of subjectivity as both theoretically and practically spontaneous (with, in the background, a construal of this spontaneity as the ultimate concern of both theoretical as well as practical philosophy in Kantian and post-Kantian German idealism) the conditions of possibility within material being itself for such subjectivity emerging out of this being *qua* lone monistic expanse. Worded differently, some guiding questions of transcendental materialism are: What makes possible the surfacing of the transcendental subject (as “second nature”) out of meta-transcendental substance (as “first nature”)? How must the material and the natural be (re)conceptualized if they indeed generate out of themselves more-than-material, denaturalized agents and actors? What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for these generative occurrences? And, to paraphrase

Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, how must we think of the universe so that it is not incomprehensible and ridiculous to affirm that it produced us in all our human peculiarity and strangeness, we who gaze back on it while remaining ensconced within it as a precious few of its myriad parts? I am a transcendental materialist insofar as I seek to delineate, via transcendental arguments as defined above, the necessary (and, I would add, also sufficient) conditions within the physical being(s) of nature for the immanent genesis of autonomous, self-determining subjectivity (itself consisting of sets of reflective, reflexive, and recursive structures and dynamics).

Having said all of the above, I nonetheless deliberately preserve and play upon certain senses of the (apparent) tension between the terms “transcendental” and “materialism.” As the preceding already reveals, transcendental materialism fundamentally is preoccupied with two of the biggest of big issues in the history of philosophy, ones closely interrelated: the freedom-determinism dispute and the mind-body problem. One of my main preoccupations is with developing integrated phylogenetic and ontogenetic accounts of the conditions of possibility for the bottom-up emergences of autonomous, more-than-material mindedness and like-mindedness out of nothing more than heteronomous matter (with the latter as understood within the frame of the naturalist materialism of the empirical, experimental sciences of nature). However, my temporally elongated genetic transcendentalism along these lines also maintains that these emergences are “strong” in the sense of eventuating in spontaneous subjects that enjoy irreducible, ineliminable independence from natural causal determinants while, at the same time, still dwelling entirely within the realms of the physical, the chemical, and the organic. The ultimate tension operative here is that between the natural and the denaturalized, with the former being self-sundering through internally producing the latter out of itself. The transcendental materialist ontological vision here is that of an auto-disruptive, self-denaturalizing nature that drives itself beyond itself, namely, a nature whose effects, at least in the forms of human *Geist* both subjective and objective, come vastly to exceed the naturalness of their causes. That is to say, the material and the natural (as meta-transcendental substances) give rise out of themselves to frictions between them and the more-than-material/denaturalized (as transcendental subjects).

Finally, in addition to *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*, I also can recommend to readers a manifesto-like essay of mine providing a succinct overview of the core tenets of transcendental materialism. It is a piece entitled

“Points of Forced Freedom: Eleven (More) Theses on Materialism” that was published last year on-line in *Speculations: A Journal of Speculative Realism*. Although in writing it I set out from the get-go to model it on the format and style of Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach,” it was pure coincidence that, in elaborating the main theses of transcendental materialism, I ended up, like Marx, with eleven; I had no sub-philosophical intention in advance of arbitrarily matching the exact number of Marx’s theses. A revised version of this text will serve as a postface to the second volume (*A Weak Nature Alone*) of my trilogy-in-progress, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism* (the first volume, *The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy*, was published this past summer, and I plan to turn over to Northwestern University Press the finalized manuscript of the second volume later this year). Last fall, I also discussed both transcendental materialism and the *Prolegomena* trilogy in an on-line interview with Peter Gratton available through *Society and Space*.

**Graham – You first became well known as probably the most systematic interpreter of Slavoj Žižek. But in this book more than ever, we see differences between you and Žižek, particularly as concerns your approach to the sciences. Tell us a bit about these differences, and why you prefer to emphasize the brain sciences rather than quantum physics.**

**Adrian** – To employ a Žižekian turn of phrase, I would characterize the disagreements between Žižek and me as “inner party disputes.” That is to say, I perceive the two of us as continuing to be in fundamental solidarity apropos the most important philosophical points of overlapping concern; we still sit together on the same theoretical Politburo. Moreover, in his recent *magnum opus*, 2012’s *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, Žižek adopts the label “transcendental materialism” in the context of critically engaging with Quentin Meillassoux in particular. I wholeheartedly agree with Žižek’s characterizations of it therein.

The critiques of Žižek in *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism* are immanent rather than external ones (as is entirely appropriate between Hegelians). Put differently, my objections to, for example, his renditions of naturalism and appropriations of quantum physics ultimately amount to indictments of him for failing to stay true in these cases to his own best insights and arguments elsewhere. In yet other words, I offer Žižekian critiques of Žižek himself,

contending that he violates the parameters of his own philosophical system in those instances for which I (sympathetically) take him to task (and, yes, I believe there is such a thing as a consistent Žižekian system, the very thing for which I initially coined the phrase “transcendental materialism”).

Of course, your question here reflects the fact that Žižek’s uses (and, arguably, abuses) of quantum physics are a central topic of critical discussion in Part Two of *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism* (specifically, Chapter Seven therein: “Spirit Is a Quark: Quantum Physics with Žižek”). My immanent critique of this Žižek pushes off from our shared commitment to a specific interpretation of Lacan’s dictum “the big Other does not exist” (*il n’y a pas de grand Autre*) as itself an *Ur*-thesis for a transcendental materialist ontology. One of the implications of this Lacanian ontological stance, an implication Žižek and I each have been developing in our own ways, is that Nature *qua* All/Whole (whether imagined as Spinoza’s substance, Laplace’s demon, Darwinian evolution as the “great chain of being,” the harmonious ecosystems of Gaia, or whatever else along these pseudo-secular, God-like lines) is a non-existent big Other, namely, the fantasy of the seamless totality of a tightly-woven tapestry of entities and events all governed and supported by this One. When Žižek declares that “Nature does not exist” or I speak of “weak nature,” what we both have in mind is the disunity of nature as per, in more Lacanese, the “barring” of the material/natural Real following from the principle of the non-existence of big Others (as regards this trajectory of thought, I recently have been drawing on the invaluable work of some of the main representatives of the Stanford School of the philosophy of science).

By flirting with, if not outright embracing, short circuits between, on the one hand, the microcosms of quantum objects and processes and, on the other hand, the (relative) macrocosms of the configurations and operations of subjects, Žižek is in danger of reinforcing a reductivist program of someone like Roger Penrose to subsume human mindedness under the explanatory jurisdiction of the physics of the extremely small. In fact, Žižek’s own dialectical/transcendental materialism entails a strong emergentism in which non-epiphenomenal level distinctions between a multiplicity of natural tiers and strata forbids simply identifying or collapsing levels such as those of the subatomic and the organic (and this apart from the external criticisms one could voice apropos the philosophical as well as scientific problems with speculating about correlations and/or causations holding between the domains of the quantum and the mental). In short, my immanent critique consists in pitting

Žižek's dialectical/transcendental materialism against his glosses on quantum physics.

In terms of a contemporary materialist interfacing with the natural sciences, I favor biology generally and neurobiology particularly for several reasons. To begin with, both for Hegelian philosophy (as manifested in the transition from its *Philosophy of Nature* to its *Philosophy of Mind*) and for various other philosophical and non-philosophical outlooks, human (like-) mindedness arises out of specifically organic nature *qua* regions of animal organisms. The life sciences, including evolutionary theory and (epi)genetics, provide the natural scientific explanations for these material bases of *Geist*, explanations that remain for the foreseeable future incapable of being replaced by impossibly cumbersome descriptions of numerically astronomical aggregates of quantum states (and, even if such substitution were possible, it might very well be undesirable in failing anyway to capture many of the salient dimensions and kinetics of living beings). So, if what one wants is a materialist and (quasi-)naturalist theory of strongly-emergent subjectivity endowed with powers of (in the parlance of Analytic philosophy of mind) "downward causation" *vis-à-vis* its material/natural grounds—this is a shared desideratum between Žižek and me—then biology, especially that of the human central nervous system, is far more crucial than quantum physics to this end. Furthermore, if one is working at the intersection of the ongoing conflicts around both the mind-body and freedom-determinism controversies, as Žižek and I are, then the philosophical struggle for (dialectical/transcendental) materialism today cannot ignore the fact that most philosophers and theorists arguing about materialism in the context of these controversies understandably pay greater amounts of attention to the life sciences by comparison with physics. In terms of the established terrain of our contemporary situation—biology and its branches have this importance not only within philosophy, but also much more widely in terms of the infrastructural and superstructural layers of today's globalized, late-capitalist societies—the life sciences are key sites of struggles for militant materialists nowadays both within and beyond the walls of academia.

Incidentally, I currently am writing a series of responses to *Less Than Nothing* that will come together to form a single, lengthy engagement with this hulking tome. As you might imagine, part of me wishes Žižek had written this book before I wrote *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (written between 2002 and 2005 and eventually published in 2008). So, I have taken the opportunities presented by a number of recent requests for essays on

Žižek to put together this longer reply to what most captured my interest in *Less Than Nothing*. I am toying with the idea of making it into a book unto itself.

**Graham – Many continental philosophers dabble in psychoanalysis, but your own relation to the field is unusually far-reaching. Please tell us something about your psychoanalytic background and how it shapes your philosophical work.**

**Adrian** – My attention first was drawn to psychoanalysis early in my undergraduate studies at the University of Texas through my interest then in such Continental philosophers as Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze. Thanks to two of my professors at UT, Katherine Arens and Kelly Oliver, I was able to spend time studying the writings of Freud and Lacan. Backing into Freud's and Lacan's bodies of work via perspectives influenced by the philosophers I just named, I initially was prepared to be quite critical and even dismissive of Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis. However, I quickly was seduced and won over. I came to find Freud and Lacan to be intellectually more satisfying and compelling than their Continental-philosophical critics. Their texts both illuminated countless facets of my own experience as well as changed the very way I saw myself and the world. I ended up writing my senior honors thesis in philosophy at UT, under the supervision of Oliver and Arens, on Foucault's ambivalent relationship to psychoanalysis, contending that Freud's legacy in France (embodied by Lacan and Kristeva, among others) retroactively exonerated Freud himself of many of the charges brought against him by the side of Foucault more antagonistic towards analysis.

I took a year off between my undergraduate studies and graduate school, during which time I worked at a bookstore and continued to read philosophical and psychoanalytic literature voraciously. Over the course of that year, my investments in Freudian and Lacanian ideas continued to deepen. Having decided to apply to doctoral programs in philosophy, I already had a hunch that I wanted to write a dissertation on drive theory, with a special focus on the vexing topic of the death drive (*Todestrieb*). I accepted an admission offer from SUNY Stony Brook not only because of its reputation as a bastion in the U.S. for the graduate-level study of Continental philosophy, but specifically because I knew I could write a psychoanalysis-heavy dissertation under the supervision of Ed Casey there. And, that is exactly what I did. My first book, *Time Driven*:

*Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive* (2005), was my dissertation, co-directed by Casey and Žižek.

While immersed in Freudian and Lacanian literature at Stony Brook, I became convinced that, sooner or later, I would need to gain familiarity with the clinical sides of analysis— if only because I felt intellectual honesty demanded that someone as invested in analytic thinking as me would be selling him/her-self short by not becoming acquainted with the practical basis of its theoretical constellations. Having tentatively explored the possibilities for this via contacts in analytic circles in next-door New York City, I thought that it would be years before I could do so. Clinical analytic training costs a great deal of time and money. Being an impoverished graduate student then, I concluded that, unless and until I had a stable, secure academic job (at least something tenure-track), I would not be able to pursue this.

After defending my dissertation, I spent some time in Wuppertal, Germany continuing my studies of Kant and German idealism. While over there, I learned that Emory University had just created a new psychoanalytic research fellowship aimed at academics interested in analysis. Emory is unusual in having not only a Psychoanalytic Studies Program in its College of Arts and Sciences (as a multidisciplinary graduate degree certificate track), but also a psychoanalytic institute within the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences in the Emory School of Medicine (few analytic institutes remain attached to university medical schools). This fellowship promised both to enable academic scholars to undergo analytic training themselves as well as to conduct analytically related research. I applied and was fortunate to be awarded one of these fellowships. That made possible, much earlier in my career than I had anticipated during my graduate studies, my extended exposure to all sides of psychoanalysis, especially its clinical/practical dimensions. The Institute faculty, mainly analytically trained psychiatrists, mostly have ego psychology and/or object-relations theory backgrounds, which is typical in the English-speaking analytic universe. But, they were very receptive and open to someone versed more in Lacanian and French analytic thinking. During those gruelingly hard but incredibly rewarding years I spent at Emory (on the couch of my training analyst, at the psychiatric unit of Grady Memorial Hospital, in theoretical and technical Institute seminars, in psycho-diagnostics tutorials, seeing patients under supervision, and many other activities), I learned an incredible amount.

My portions of the book I co-authored with Catherine Malabou, *Self and Emotional Life: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Neuroscience* (2013), represent the first sustained processing in print of some of what I learned from my analytic training. My main concern therein is with revisiting the problem of unconscious affects in Freud and Lacan. I hope and expect that other aspects of my clinical background, including ones that might not yet have become entirely explicit and transparent to me, will inspire further research projects on analysis in the years to come. Taking the instances of how I critically interpret Freud's and Lacan's texts in *Self and Emotional Life*, I can say that I would not have been able to read them in this way had I not gone through the training process. During and after my time at Emory, I repeatedly have had the experience of re-reading a piece of analytic writing I read prior to embarking on clinical endeavors and being struck by just how many details either appear quite differently to me or pop out at me in ways they did not before; things I previously did not notice or understand stepped forward as clear and often central points. This further reinforced my conviction that, however much an intelligent and devoted academic reader of analytic writings may be able to take from them, his/her borrowings will be partial and his/her perspective limited. Lacan never wearied of addressing "we analysts" and appealing again and again to "our [clinical analytic] experience"; he explicitly pitched his teachings first and foremost to analytic trainees and practitioners. He was not bluffing about this.

Psychoanalysis informs my philosophical labors in a number of manners. I consider Freud's discovery of the unconscious to be a Badiouian-style seismic Event-with-a-capital-E that philosophers ignore to the detriment of their own reflections. Particularly at the levels of epistemology, ontology, philosophical anthropology, and a theory of subjectivity, the Freudian revolution has major implications that the past century of Continental philosophy has been better about spending time digesting than the Analytic tradition—although much still remains to be done in this regard. My own transcendental materialism is conditioned and made possible by psychoanalysis, to which it is profoundly indebted for its very vision of who and what we are. In addition to the unconscious, analysis also adds to my philosophical outlook its unique fashions of conceptualizing the more emotional and motivational facets of human beings often under-theorized in the philosophical tradition (through its accounts of affects, drives, and libidinal economies). What is more, clinical/practical analytic experience in particular helped temper my occupational tendency as a philosopher to seek the quickest routes from, as it

were, particularity to universality. While at Emory, I had a psycho-diagnostics tutor who I repeatedly made grimace with my habitual philosopher's attempts to identify underlying generalities perhaps extractable from specific bits of therapeutic case material under discussion. She was great at showing me why and how this functioned effectively as an impediment to me appreciating the nature of the theory-practice dynamic in action. Apropos my philosophical engagements with both psychoanalysis and the sciences, I would like to believe that such analytic experiences have better sensitized me to need for philosophy to acknowledge, respect, and do justice to the extra-philosophical peculiarities and uniquenesses of more empirically oriented fields.

**Graham – Despite your obvious admiration for Freud, it would be more accurate to call you a Lacanian. What does we get from Lacan that we cannot get from Freud?**

**Adrian** – In my view, Marx and Freud, along with Kant and Hegel, are the unrivaled towering giants of the history of ideas from mid-modernity to the present. All four, in addition to a number of others (such as Fichte, Schelling, Engels, Lenin, Lacan, Laplanche, Badiou, Žižek, and Malabou), are crucial sources of insight and inspiration for me. However, whereas most of these figures themselves engage directly and in detail with the history of philosophy in their own work, Freud is famously allergic to such engagements. Partly due to Freud's justified disdain for quackery in German-speaking medical circles inspired especially by Schellingian *Naturphilosophie*—his negative regard for philosophy *überhaupt* is very much contextually determined by his (mis)perceptions of German idealism and its consequences—Freud carefully resists getting drawn into explicit, lengthy conversations with the Western philosophical tradition. Of course, Freud's ideas regarding scientificity and anxieties about the wider public standing of analysis also shape his avoidance of philosophy and philosophers.

Now, I take Lacan at his word when he tirelessly insists that he is a die-hard, orthodox Freudian. From the period of Lacan's "return to Freud" until his death, his teachings indeed should be interpreted as, most fundamentally, explorations of Freud's texts, concepts, practices, and legacy. Even when Lacan speaks and writes in his own technical parlance (i.e., Lacanese), his discourse never is without intimate relations to *le champ freudien*. The best rule of thumb for deciphering Lacan when one finds him to be opaque and impenetrable is to

begin by asking, “How might this be connected to specific points in Freud’s *oeuvre*?”

As is common knowledge, Lacan, unlike Freud, does not shy away from drawing upon his philosophical predecessors and contemporaries. Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, and Hegel are referred to by Lacan almost as often as Freud himself. Lacan’s intellectual itinerary reflects a continuously maintained set of ongoing exchanges with contemporaneous twentieth-century developments in philosophy, including phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism, post-structuralism, semiotics, feminism, and deconstruction (not to mention his periodic remarks on various Analytic figures from Russell to Kripke).

Although Lacan’s injections of copious quantities of philosophical references and terminology into Freudianism may appear to violate both Freud’s letter and spirit, I would contend, with Lacan, that such is not the case. In fact, Freud’s corpus is in and of itself philosophically very rich and sophisticated, with Lacan thus merely helping to raise Freud to the dignity of the latter’s own Notion (to phrase this in a Hegelian fashion). Lacan not only is amazingly adept at bringing out the philosophical nuances and subtleties already harbored within Freud’s works— he also is peerless in the extent to which he creatively extracts numerous further philosophical implications, strikingly novel and significant ones, from close considerations of Freud.

None of the above is meant to imply or assert that Freudian and/or Lacanian analysis can and should be reduced to philosophy *per se*. There indeed are many non-negligible differences between psychoanalysis and philosophy. However, as someone invested in both fields, I find Lacan utterly invaluable for a careful, satisfying philosophical assessment of Freud’s discoveries. I would go so far as to say that nobody else in the analytic field comes remotely close to Lacan in terms of putting Freudian psychoanalysis into productive dialogue with philosophy past and present. As someone deeply committed to sustaining this dialogue, this is the most important thing (although not the only one) I get from Lacan’s teachings.

**Graham – Along with Žižek you have worked closely with another leading European philosopher, Catherine Malabou. What has been Malabou’s**

**significance for you, and what is the most important thing present-day philosophy can learn from her?**

Žižek was responsible for first drawing my attention to Malabou's work—specifically, her groundbreaking 2004 text *Que faire de notre cerveau? (What Should We Do with our Brain?)*. It was around 2006 that I read this book, which was a real experience that compelled me promptly to devour the rest of her published writings then available. In April 2007, I had the opportunity to meet Malabou at an event at Cornell University at which we both were speaking. Quite fortunately, we immediately hit it off in person. And, intellectually, we recognized each other as having a tremendous amount in common. We both operate at the intersections of philosophy, biology, and psychoanalysis and, in particular, jointly are pursuing immanent critical engagements with the life sciences anchored in the history of European philosophy generally and the tradition of (post-)Hegelian dialectical materialism especially. Apart from Žižek himself, few other contemporary philosophers besides Malabou and myself conjure with this specific array of multiple disciplinary resources. That alone already provides Malabou and me with a feeling of kinship and solidarity. This feeling is further reinforced for the two of us, with our similar insurances on the significance of various things biological, by our shared struggles against the antinaturalist tendencies continuing to hold general sway amongst Continental philosophers and their fellow travelers in the theoretical humanities.

Soon after meeting in 2007, Malabou and I decided we wanted to co-author a book together. This decision initiated the dual brainstorming process that eventually led to *Self and Emotional Life*. In my introduction to it, I tell the story of our meeting and collaboration in more detail than here. Moreover, therein, I also spell out how Malabou and I, while sharing so much in common, also pointedly disagree with each other on a number of crucial issues; many of these cluster around questions concerning the consequences of neurobiological discoveries for psychoanalysis both theoretical/metapsychological and practical/clinical. Loosely speaking, Malabou is more anti-, and me more pro-, psychoanalytic. The penultimate (eleventh) chapter of *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism* ("The Real Unconscious: Malabou, Soler, and Psychical Life After Lacan") amounts to an additional installment after *Self and Emotional Life* addressing some of the disagreements structuring the latter book. I happily anticipate that Malabou and I will remain in dialogue for many years to come.

In my view, there are a number of important things Malabou has to teach contemporary philosophers. To begin with, her engagements with the sciences strike a nice balance between, on the one hand, respect and enthusiasm and, on the other hand, immanent critical/philosophical non-submissiveness. I think this balanced stance, avoiding extreme versions of either science-philia or science-phobia, is exemplary and ought to serve as a model for other philosophers on both sides of the Analytic-Continental divide. Furthermore, Malabou deserves enormous credit for having discerned and developed the spontaneous dialectic impulses arguably operative within today's life sciences (usually at an *an sich* rather than an *an und für sich* level in these sciences, to employ fitting Hegelese here). Finally, I consider her reflections on essentialism and anti-essentialism in the three areas of ontology, feminist theory, and biopolitics—she consistently bases these reflections on her science-supported dialectical materialism of “plasticity”—to be of great significance and productivity. In particular, she convincingly demonstrates that a dialectical materialist (quasi-)naturalism supported by biology need not (and, indeed, should not) be construed as tantamount to an old-style naturalist essentialism entailing an objectifying, reifying reduction of everyone to a set of pre-determined codes and programs dictated by evolutionary-genetic imperatives and neurobiological hard-wiring; in short, the either/or choice between naturalist essentialism and anti-naturalist anti-essentialism presently can be seen to be a false dilemma. These are lessons philosophers of all orientations and persuasions would do well to heed nowadays.

**Graham – The third chapter of your book targets what you call “neo-Spinozism.” Where can we find this philosophy today, and why is it not the path we ought to pursue?**

As I describe it therein, neo-Spinozism is a big tent today, especially in Continental philosophical circles. Amongst Continentalists, much of this is to be attributed to the lasting influences of Althusser and Deleuze. The third chapter you ask about is set up by the second chapter of *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism* (“For a Thoughtful Ontology: Hegel’s Immanent Critique of Spinoza”). I revisit Hegel’s various interrelated criticisms of Spinoza (and of those, such as Schelling at certain moments, who fail to maintain sufficient distance from Spinozism) with an eye to their enduring relevance. One of the major fault lines of tension amongst those in today’s theoretical humanities self-

identifying as “materialists” could be described as the division between neo-Spinozists (such as Jane Bennett and William Connolly, about whom you ask below, as well as various Althusserians and, especially, the multitude of Deleuzians still around and working) and neo-Hegelians (such as Žižek, Malabou, and myself). Hence, I believe that revisiting the Spinoza-Hegel rapport is particularly important considering this specific contemporary philosophical situation of intra-materialist antagonism.

To cut a long story short, I consider Spinozisms both old and new to be flat, monochromatic monisms of little explanatory value indefensibly sidelining subjectivity and everything associated with it (here, my arguments against reductive, eliminative, and/or epiphenomenalist analyses of subjects come into play, ones laid out in Part One of *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism* as well as elsewhere). As with Hegel’s dismissal of “the night in which all cows are black,” I see nothing philosophically or intellectually interesting or productive in repetitively chanting *ad nauseum* the mantra “*hen kai pan*,” endlessly invoking nothing more than the vacuity of a hypothesized Infinite, *Natura naturans*, or whatever else along these lines as the alpha-and-omega of a fundamental ontology. Moreover, these monisms seem to me to be arrived at via some sort of epistemologically under/un-justified magical, mystical power of intellectual intuition (*à la* Hegel’s disqualification of those who put forward supposed knowledge as if it could be formulated “as though shot from a pistol”) based on arbitrary inclinations and tastes. Related to this, neo-Spinozists strike me as too pre-Kantian, behaving as though Kant had never existed and they easily can ignore the deadly serious epistemological issues and problems raised by the *Critique of Pure Reason* and similar works. By contrast with contemporary neo-Spinozists, the post-Fichtean German idealists who wished to reconsider and appropriate select aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy did so in tandem with meticulous, sustained considerations of Kant’s critical-transcendental framework. These objective/absolute idealists’ “Spinozism of freedom” (as a synthesis of the split between, on the one side, Spinoza’s monism and, on the other side, Kant’s and Fichte’s transcendental idealisms), which I see as the primary historical precursor of transcendental materialism, is very different from the Spinozisms of those I describe as “neo-Spinozists.”

Apart from these objections to neo-Spinozism at the level of theoretical philosophy (*qua* ontology and epistemology), I never have been convinced by either Spinoza himself nor any of his advocates that a precise group of implications at the level of practical philosophy (as ethics, politics, etc.)

necessary flow from the monistic metaphysics of Spinozism. This metaphysics strikes me as being ethically and politically neutral in and of itself. Admittedly, it can be read as progressive or radical, as do many who follow in the footsteps of Althusser, Deleuze, *et al.* But, it does not have to be read in these ways. In fact, I readily can imagine far-right readings of it as underpinning organicist-totalitarian models of society and state. To return yet again to the German-speaking world of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries—as I hope has become evident by this point, I operate with the conviction that making headway with respect to current philosophical/theoretical questions and problems requires parallel ongoing engagements with the history of philosophy behind these very questions and problems—the *Pantheismusstreit* triggered in the 1780s by Jacobi’s invocations of Spinoza help bring to light the inherent ambiguities of Spinozism in relation to the areas of concern to practical philosophy. One of the challenges Jacobi poses for Spinoza’s proponents then and now is the possibility of interpreting the system of 1677’s *Ethics* as ultimately fatalistic, quietistic, and nihilistic. Jacobi’s interpretations, whatever their inaccuracies, are much more sophisticated and harder to dismiss than Spinozists past and present might like to admit.

**Graham – Your book discusses the political philosopher William Connolly, who is perhaps less well known in continental philosophy than his collaborator, Jane Bennett. What important lessons could we learn from Connolly?**

In terms of what Connolly has to teach Continental philosophers and their allies in other disciplines, I would pinpoint two contributions made by him. First, he sometimes is careful to acknowledge that there are no straight lines of automatic entailment between ontologies and political theories. Instead, as he depicts it, certain pictures of being nudge our reflections on politics in a general range of directions without, for all that, compelling the affirmation of one specific political position. As my remarks about the practical-philosophical dimensions of Spinoza’s metaphysics at the end of my answer to your previous question already hint, I tend to agree with Connolly about this.

The second thing to be appreciated in Connolly’s work is its admirable exemplification of a genuine spirit of all-too-rare real interdisciplinarity, one spanning the full range of disciplines from the humanities to the natural

sciences. A lot of lip service is paid to interdisciplinarity in academia. But, not only is much scholarly output still narrowly restricted by (hyper-) specialization—academics continue literally not to put their money where their purportedly interdisciplinary mouths are, with academic hires very rarely involving a crossing of traditional disciplinary boundary-lines. In this vein, Connolly, like Malabou, strives to bridge the gap between, on the one hand, the humanities and social sciences (especially as informed by the Continental philosophical tradition) and, on the other hand, the life sciences (particularly neurobiology). I believe this precise variety of interdisciplinarity pursued by Connolly is the future not only for philosophy in general, but for the theoretical humanities as a whole.

**Graham – Two full chapters of the book are dedicated to your ongoing friendly dispute with the prominent young Swedish philosopher Martin Hägglund of Yale University. Having seen the two of you debate in person on one occasion (in New York in 2012), I can say that it does seem to be an unusually fruitful dialogue between friends. What is the major philosophical difference between you and Hägglund? Is there any way it can be resolved, or does it ultimately boil down to two “irreducible and competing intuitions,” as the phrase goes?**

In a nutshell, Hägglund is a Derridean and I am not. I suspect that this encapsulates an irresolvable difference between us. I am not alone in considering Hägglund’s output thus far as achieving, among other of its accomplishments, a systematic consolidation and streamlining of Derrida’s philosophy. This elegant and lucid systematization has set a new standard for all reckonings with Derrida to come, which is no small achievement in itself. Hence, if one is going to have a Derridean sparring partner, one cannot do better than Hägglund.

As I observe at the start of the first of the two chapters (Chapters Eight and Nine) of *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism* on Hägglund, what makes him even more suitable as an interlocutor for me is the fact that he and I engage with a similar ensemble of topics and areas: time, desire, drive, religion, atheism, German idealism, psychoanalysis, and post-War French philosophy. Both this collection of common concerns as well as our different ways of addressing them reflect the convergences and divergences between Derridean and Lacanian

perspectives. After approximately six years of substantial exchanges between us, my impression now is that there are two “irreducible and competing intuitions” rendering each of our positions incompatible with the other. Hägglund believes both, one, that temporal finitude (*à la* Derrida) is the ultimate and unsurpassable horizon of everything for us as the psychical beings that we are as well as, two, that our psychical lives are exhaustively analyzable at the level of inscriptions, marks, traces, and the like (i.e., signifier-like ideational representations [*Vorstellungen*] as per Freud and Lacan).

Of course, Hägglund’s second intuition here is crucial for his first insofar as treating the psyche as essentially a “text” consisting entirely of traces prepares it for prompt subsumption under the overarching temporal logic of *différance*. By contrast, I maintain that this Derridean outlook cannot capture various things Lacan associates with the Real (*qua* resisting inscription, representation, etc.) and that these things, to the extent that that are not reducible to Derrida-style spatio-temporal mark/traces, do not obey the logics of finitude in which time is thoroughly entwined with such marks/traces (in Chapter Nine of *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*, I list as examples of such Real things “primal repression, trauma, foreclosure, *objet petit a*” and “*jouissance*”). Consequently, for me, Hägglund’s Derrideanism cannot account for numerous salient, distinctive features of the properly psychoanalytic unconscious and, relatedly, fails to do justice to the multifaceted richness of clinical analysis. For Hägglund, the facticity of thrownness (as Heideggerian *Geworfenheit*) into vulnerable, perishable flesh (in a word, our mortality) is the be all and end all of desiring life, the one and only center of gravity of our libidinal economies. I find this to be much too limited a perspective, both phenomenologically and metapsychologically, on what drives our libidinal lives. There are other bones of contention between the two of us, which are spelled out in detail in *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*. But, reflecting back on our previous debates, it currently seems to me that a lot of our six-year conversation can be boiled down to the above-mentioned two pairs of opposed theoretical intuitions.

As the immediately preceding already unambiguously suggests, psychoanalysis is the main object of dispute between Hägglund and me. Basically, I have functioned as a defender of a more orthodox version of Freudian and Lacanian analysis against his critical calls for significant revisions of analysis in response to Derrida’s philosophical contributions. With his incisiveness and rigor, Hägglund has pushed me in unique ways to clarify for myself my exact comprehensions of multiple core analytic concepts and doctrines. In part thanks to our combination

of no-holds-barred debating with amicable respect, I have learned a great deal from my dialogues with Hägglund. Moreover, I genuinely enjoy conversing with him and deeply value having him as an interlocutor and friend.

**Graham – The subtitle of your final chapter runs as follows: “Why I am Not an Immanent Naturalist or Vital Materialist.” Could you explain briefly what each of these terms means, and why neither of them fits you well?**

This question relates to your seventh question above, with “immanent naturalism” and “vital materialism” being the labels for Connolly’s and Bennett’s significantly overlapping theoretical stances respectively. For reasons explained in *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*, I identify both of these positions as neo-Spinozist (therefore, my answer to your sixth question about neo-Spinozism already partly explains “why I am not an immanent naturalist or vital materialist”). My attention was drawn to Bennett by, roughly speaking, the speculative realist community’s excitement about her 2010 book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. However, I stumbled upon Connolly independently, although this was bound to happen sooner or later given my own research at the intersection of the humanities and the life sciences. More specifically, a number of years ago, I came across Connolly’s 2002 book *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* and assigned it as part of a graduate seminar on “biopolitics” broadly construed.

Connolly’s immanent naturalism and Bennett’s vital materialism both exhibit striking similarities to transcendental materialism: in particular, all three of these positions’ willingness to draw on natural scientific resources and their shared conviction that these resources and reliance upon them does not result in any kind of mechanistic, deterministic dead-end. Thus, pinpointing the differences that make for real differences between Connolly, Bennett, and me, despite these similarities, appeared to me to be important to do. Explaining to myself and others how and why transcendental materialism is distinctive *vis-à-vis* both immanent naturalism and vital materialism (i.e., “why I am not an immanent naturalist or vital materialist”) allowed me further to illuminate and sharpen the contours of my own stance. This is what motivates the twelfth and final chapter of *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*.

In addition but related to my divergences from Bennett and Connolly paralleling the contemporary rift between neo-Hegelianism and neo-Spinozism (as I sketched this earlier in response to your sixth question), I voice reservations about their political visions in *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*. I argue that their liquidations of conceptions of subjectivity as autonomous agency not only are theoretically contestable, but also practically problematic (I consider Marx's dual theoretical and practical criticisms of what he characterizes as "contemplative materialism" in his "Theses on Feuerbach" as applying equally well to immanent naturalism and vital materialism). Their neo-Spinozistic (and very Deleuzian) pictures of reality as consisting exclusively of teeming multitudes of asubjective assemblages cross-resonating in web-like networks are not, by my lights, conducive to the sorts of political thinking so urgently needed by today's Left (just as these same pictures arguably failed the Left during May 1968 and its aftermath).

Of course, neither Bennett nor Connolly embrace Marxism as someone like me does. But, taking Bennett's ecological agenda as an occasion for spelling out my objections here as an immanent (rather than purely external) critique, her vital materialist ontology is at least as likely to blunt (instead of intensify) the anxieties and worries that would galvanize political action apropos looming environmental threats; her "political ecology of things" dovetails all-too-nicely with a spontaneous quotidian phenomenology mitigating against the outbreak of negative affects that might actually motivate what she considers to be desirable ecological efforts. As for Connolly's political views, with his fidelity to a non-Marxist, Foucauldian-style micro-politics, they are underpinned by what I consider to be an unjustified faith in capitalo-parliamentarianism (to utilize Badiouian phrasing) and its reformability. Bennett's and Connolly's joint reliances on a French philosophical background (a primarily Deleuzian-Foucauldian one) lop-sidedly highlighting dimensions involving tissues of micro-powers is a recipe for a non-radical reformism, namely, more of the same *status quo* business as usual, regardless of the speciously subversive-sounding rhetoric of certain political-theoretical discourses.

However, Connolly and Bennet, like Žižek, Malabou, and Hägglund (as well as other dialogue partners featuring in *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*) are productively "extimate" for me (as per Lacan's neologism for the intimately exterior). By this I mean that those whose work is close to the animating core of my own projects and yet, at the same time, whose orientations are crucially different from mine in certain respects are my most valued intellectual others.

On the basis of my own experiences, I have found that immanent critiques of those most proximate to one's own position are by far the most worthwhile and rewarding critical engagements.

**Graham – You are an unusually energetic speaker and writer, with a vast track record of productivity from a relatively young age. Could you help our readers with some tips about how to organize one's intellectual life?**

My initial impulse in response to this question is to reach for a *Simpsons* reference. During one episode of this television show, the evil local tycoon C. Montgomery Burns visits Lisa Simpson's Junior Achievers Club to give a talk on succeeding in business. Mr. Burns explains—"I'll keep it short and sweet. Family, religion, friendship. These are the three demons you must slay if you wish to succeed in business. When opportunity knocks, you don't want to be driving to a maternity hospital or sitting in some phony-baloney church. Or synagogue." Although I am tempted to say the same for those wishing to succeed in academia, this would not be entirely accurate.

To begin responding with more seriousness, if you want to pursue a research-oriented academic career, the first crucial factor is your desire (and I state this with no accompanying moral judgments insinuating or maintaining that certain desires are somehow superior to other ones). To be more precise, if this is experienced by you as a calling, as a vocation you feel you were put on this earth to do (as the saying goes); if you cannot imagine doing anything else with your life; in short, if you absolutely love reading and writing about your intellectual interests such that it never seems like "work" (i.e., tedious drudgery) and you would choose to do this with your spare time even in circumstances where you had to hold down a non-academic day job— then you ought to aim for this type of academic career. However, if these conditions do not hold for you, then you will not have the underlying drive needed for sustained research productivity and likely will find the many negative trade-offs involved with this career (in terms of income, geography, lifestyle, etc.) too unpleasant and dissatisfying to endure with much acceptance. But, if you desire nothing more than to eat, sleep, and breathe philosophy/theory, go for it. If your intellectual labor is a gratifying end in itself, then the inevitable, unpredictable ups and downs of your more external, incidental professional fates will be less difficult to tolerate.

Assuming that the preceding conditions are the case for you, it will not be difficult to make reading and writing daily rituals. They ought to become habits so deeply engrained that you feel weird and out of sorts if you do not manage to spend time on them during a given day (although, of course, there will be days when other aspects of life prevent you from doing so). Relatedly, do not let non-research-related institutional or organizational commitments interfere with your research work itself; ruthlessly minimize as much as possible all such distractions and diversions.

Furthermore, be willing and able continually to adjust, sometime from day to day, the balance between time spent on reading and writing. I also recommend having multiple writing projects going simultaneously, albeit not too many at once (two to three is, from my experience, ideal). This way, if you experience writer's block, frustration, and/or burnout in relation to one project, you can try switching to another one. I recall learning that Freud employed this trick, and I have found it often enables me to avoid delays in moving forward with my writing efforts taken *en masse*.

Apropos writer's block itself, my first piece of advice is to narrow as much as possible the gap between your spoken and written voices. If the latter is more like the former, then the writing itself probably will flow more smoothly. I have discovered for myself that if I think about my written articulations along the lines of expressing these ideas aloud to someone else, explaining them as I would in the course of a conversation, then it becomes clearer to me what and how I need to write. Similarly, it helps greatly to have a set of multiple imaginary interlocutors to call on when considering what and how to write, whether these interlocutors are based on real persons you know, real persons you do not know, and/or invented individuals. Some of these envisioned addressees of your writing should be more sympathetic in various manners to your project, others more skeptical or even hostile. The sympathetic imagined interlocutors assist with sustaining the required confidence and enthusiasm. The skeptical/hostile ones assist both with forcing you to maximize argumentative stringency as well as with enlivening your texts with passionate polemical ferocity.

Finally, resist falling prey to perfectionism. Of course, polish your pieces thoroughly. But, do not get hung up on endlessly gilding each and every lily. Instead, try to consider each piece, no matter how long and detailed, as a mere snapshot of just a part of your thinking from a limited stretch of time. This is, in fact, what they always necessarily are. And, considering your texts as anything

more than this threatens to interfere with your willingness and ability to part with them through sending them off again and again for (potential) publication.

I greatly appreciate and am motivated by my sense of the imperfections of the work I have finished and published to date. I hope that I never come to suffer the awareness that something I have written actually is my definitive *magnum opus*. This would be a libidinal trauma for me, the lived experience of my own intellectual death.