

# Lacking Causes: Privative Causality from Locke and Kant to Lacan and Deacon

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From Alexandre Koyré in the middle of the twentieth century to Quentin Meillassoux today, much of French epistemology and philosophy of science has relied upon a one-sided neo-rationalist appropriation of the Galilean distinction between primary and secondary qualities<sup>1</sup> (a neo-rationalism indefensibly ignoring Baconian empiricism, with the latter's emphasis on methodical observation and experimentation as essential to scientificity in the modern sense). The very

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- 1 Galileo Galilei, "The Assayer," *Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo*, trans. Stillman Drake, New York: Anchor, 1957, 274-278 (Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), 99, 278. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), 1-3, 8, 13. Adrian Johnston, "This is orthodox Marxism: The Shared Materialist *Weltanschauung* of Marx and Engels," *Quaderni materialisti*, 2013, special issue: "On Sebastiano Timpanaro" [forthcoming]. Adrian Johnston, "Turning the Sciences Inside Out: Revisiting Lacan's 'Science and Truth,'" *Concept and Form, Volume Two: Interviews and Essays on the Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, ed. Peter Hallward and Knox Peden (London: Verso, 2012), 105-122. Adrian Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism: Volume One, The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013).

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phrasing of this distinction legible in Galileo Galilei's 1623 text "The Assayer" is to be found in another canonical work of the early modern period: British empiricist John Locke's hulking 1690 tome *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke takes up the matter of primary and secondary qualities in "Chapter Eight" ("Some Further Considerations Concerning Our Simple Ideas of Sensation") of "Book Two" ("Of Ideas").<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, Locke's handling of these different discerned qualities of perceptible bodies is immediately preceded, in the opening paragraphs of "Chapter Eight, Book Two" of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, by discussion of another distinction, namely, that between two types of causes, "positive" and "privative"<sup>3</sup> (in both the 1763 pre-critical essay "Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes Into Philosophy" and the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant later covers similar terrain with greater technical precision and exactitude<sup>4</sup>). As per the mind-world, subject-object model underpinning his epistemology, Locke distinguishes between two possible categories of origins or sources in the objective world for the subjective mind's ideas: presences and absences. In terms of what he dubs "simple ideas of sensation" (i.e., basic percepts of consciousness),<sup>5</sup> coldness and darkness count as two straightforward illustrations of these kinds of ideas. As contents of a subject's sentient awareness, the ideas of coldness and darkness are, as are all ideas *qua* mental contents in general for Locke, effects generated in

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2 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Complete and Unabridged in Two Volumes: Volume One*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (New York: Dover, 1959), 168–171.

3 Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 166–168.

4 Immanuel Kant, "Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes Into Philosophy," *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*, ed. David Walford; trans. David Walford and Ralf Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 217, 221, 236.

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1965), A290/B346–A292/B349.

5 Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 148–150.

the mind by the extra-mental world. However, in instances of sensory-perceptual ideational representations such as the two being considered as examples here, a question that can be asked is whether certain sorts of simple ideas of sensation actually are caused by the presence or absence of a given entity or event in mind-independent objective being. Are the ideas of coldness and darkness triggered by the presence of really-existing, non-ideational coldness and darkness (i.e., positive causes), or are they merely the mental representations of the absences of heat and light (i.e., privative causes)?

Locke tries to remain noncommittal about the ontological reality of privative causes over the short course of the six paragraphs treating them as distinct from positive causes (Kant too subsequently wavers, confessing that, “it is often difficult to decide whether certain negations of nature are merely lacks [*Mängel*] arising from the absence of a ground, or deprivations resulting from the real opposition [*Realentgegensetzung*] of two positive grounds”<sup>6</sup>). In this, Locke is being uncharacteristically consistent. At the outset of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he announces his intention to restrict himself exclusively to epistemology, thereby avoiding forays into the realms of ontology.<sup>7</sup> But, in both Locke’s case as well as that of the Kantian transcendental idealism Locke helps to inspire, the gesture of restricting theoretical philosophy to epistemology must, in the very act of its performance, simultaneously violate this its own restriction; it must either overtly posit or covertly presuppose a corresponding ontology supporting even empiricist and/or critical theories of knowledge ostensibly agnostic about being as it is in and of itself beyond knowing.<sup>8</sup>

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- 6 Immanuel Kant, “Versuch, den Begriff der negativen Grössen in die Weltweisheit einzuführen,” *Vorkritische Schriften bis 1768*, Werkausgabe, Band II, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968), 813.  
Kant, “Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes Into Philosophy,” 236.
- 7 Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 25–33.
- 8 Adrian Johnston, “Repeating Engels: Renewing the Cause of the Materialist Wager for the Twenty-First Century,” *Theory @ Buffalo*, no. 15, special

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Without contradicting his inconsistently maintained ontological agnosticism, Locke admits the possibility in principle of objective privations (i.e., absences, lacks, etc.) being real causes of simple ideas of sensation as positive contents in the minds of subjects *qua* conscious epistemological agents.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, he allows for the meaningfulness of “negative names” designating privations as themselves given facts of experience known to minded awareness.<sup>10</sup> But, Locke quickly moves on to consideration of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, leaving behind that between positive and privative causes in a state of uncertainty, indeterminateness, and irresolution. One of my guiding intentions in this intervention is to revive and enrich the category of privative causality for the benefit of contemporary philosophy and today’s modern sciences, which themselves are the descendants not only of Galileo, but also of Francis Bacon and the British empiricism following in his wake (including that of Locke and the David Hume who awakens Kant from his “dogmatic slumber”<sup>11</sup>).

At the end of the second section of his “Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes Into Philosophy,” Kant, as elsewhere in this essay (and throughout his mature *oeuvre* in its entirety), evinces a modest hesitancy reflecting the cautious philosophical temperament systematically expressed in the monumental *Critique of Pure Reason*. He observes that:

The negative and positive causality of different forms of matter...seems to conceal important truths. It is to be hoped that a more fortunate posterity, on whose happy existence we direct our gaze, will one day discover the universal laws which govern these phenomena, which

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issue: “animal.machine.sovereign,” 155–156.

Adrian Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism: Volume Two, A Weak Nature Alone* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press [forthcoming]).

9 Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 167.

10 Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 167–168.

11 Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. Paul Carus; rev. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1977), 5.

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for the moment only appear to us under the form of a still ambiguous harmony.<sup>12</sup>

Pushing off against this brief passage, my leading aim in this context is to foreground and elucidate the “negative... causality of different forms of matter.” Moreover, I strive to do so differently than would Kant—and this in three respects: first, by conceiving of matter in a both realist and materialist fashion at odds with the anti-realism of transcendental idealism, with its “material” objects as mere phenomenal appearances; second, by showing how and why a sufficiently rich account of the negativities of privative causes problematizes the very notion of “universal laws” in the natural sciences as appealed to by Kant here and throughout his corpus (and this precisely insofar as these real absences aid in giving rise to subjects who themselves are not governed by the so-called “universal laws of nature”); and, three, by resolving the ambiguity of Kant’s “still ambiguous harmony” through revealing the fundamentally disharmonious structures and dynamics of material beings. Nonetheless, rather than categorically rejecting Kantian transcendentalism outright, my “transcendental materialism” refuses to write off the subjectivity of transcendental idealism as an empty illusion or ineffective epiphenomenon. Instead, inspired by F.W.J. Schelling and G.W.F. Hegel among others, I seek properly to situate such subjectivity *vis-à-vis* the meta-transcendental conditions of possibility for it as itself transcendental, pinpointing these ontological *Ur*-conditions at the levels of incarnate substantial actualities.<sup>13</sup>

Leaping ahead from the eighteenth century to the present, biological anthropologist Terrence Deacon’s 2012 book *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged From Matter* is an ambitious

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12 Kant, “Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes Into Philosophy,” 226.

13 Adrian Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 269–287; Johnston, *The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy*; Johnston, *A Weak Nature Alone*.

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attempt to incorporate privations and negations into the still-current modern worldviews prevailing in the empirical and experimental sciences overall. It warrants sustained scrutiny in this setting. Even though, as the preceding remarks already indicate, Baconian-Galilean science and the British empiricism of Locke cohabitate and intermingle during early modernity, Deacon correctly asserts that modern natural science tends to ignore and/or exclude any type of negativity or privation from playing causal roles in its explanations of the physical universe. Framing his endeavor as a neither reductive nor eliminative theory of the emergence of life and mind from matter, he declares:

Each of these sorts of phenomena—a function, reference, purpose, or value—is in some way incomplete. There is something not-there there.

Without this ‘something’ missing, they would just be plain and simple physical objects or events, lacking these otherwise curious attributes.

Longing, desire, passion, appetite, mourning, loss, aspiration—all are based on an analogous intrinsic incompleteness, an integral without-ness.<sup>14</sup>

Deacon continues:

As I reflect on this odd state of things, I am struck by the fact that there is no single term that seems to refer to this elusive character of such things.

So, at the risk of initiating this discussion with a clumsy neologism, I will refer to this as an *absential* feature, to denote phenomena whose existence is determined with respect to an essential absence. This could be a state of things not yet realized, a specific separate object of a representation, a general type of property that may or may not exist, an abstract quality, an experience, and so forth—just not that which is

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<sup>14</sup> Terrence W. Deacon, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged From Matter* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2012), 2-3.

actually present. This paradoxical intrinsic quality of existing with respect to something missing, separate, and possibly nonexistent is irrelevant when it comes to inanimate things, but it is a *defining property of life and mind*. A complete theory of the world that includes us, and our experiences of the world, must make sense of the way that we are shaped by and emerge from such specific absences. What is absent matters, and yet our current understanding of the physical universe suggests that it should not. A causal role for absence seems to be absent from the natural sciences.<sup>15</sup>

Deacon’s “absentialism” reasonably can be identified as a belated move in the direction of bridging the gap between, on the one hand, Bacon and Galileo (i.e., modern science as running from them, through Isaac Newton, and up to the contemporary conjuncture) and, on the other hand, Locke and Kant specifically apropos the topic of privative/negative causes. Deacon does not address Locke’s or Kant’s reflections on privative/negative causality, instead fingering Locke as guilty of contributing to the dominance of a mechanistic positivism in the natural sciences opposed by absentialism.<sup>16</sup> Deacon’s only other reference to Locke’s philosophy is a passing mention of this empiricist’s metaphor of the *tabula rasa*.<sup>17</sup> However, Deacon explicitly invokes Kant’s depiction of life as per the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, indicating the indebtedness of his absential conception of organisms to Kant.<sup>18</sup>

My response to *Incomplete Nature* is mixed. Starting with what in Deacon’s book inspires enthusiasm in me, I wholeheartedly endorse his call for a new scientific *Weltanschauung* overcoming the narrowness of the worldview of modern science reigning for the past four centuries, a narrowness

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15 Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 3.

16 Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 149.

17 Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 124.

18 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951) §64-65.  
Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 302.

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resulting from an almost exclusive focus on the efficient causes operative in the material domains covered by the supposedly fundamental and ultimate discipline of physics. Phenomena associated with the Aristotelian category of final causality (i.e., the teleological structures and dynamics of intentionality broadly construed as exhibited by living organisms and minded subjects) clearly provide Deacon with exemplars of the absential (non-)entities and (non-)events he strives to encompass in an expanded and transformed scientific paradigm. However, by contrast with idealist reactions against the prohibition of appeals to final causes in the natural sciences of modernity (whether along the lines of Leibnizian monadology, Husserlian phenomenology, or whatever else in these sorts of idealist molds), Deaconian absentialism admirably struggles to remain firmly materialist.

As Karl Marx brilliantly perceives in his 1845 “Theses on Feuerbach,” anti-materialist idealisms and dualisms retain their tempting allure so long as the only materialisms on offer are mechanistic or reductive, namely, explanatory schemes granting no place or role for subjects as active kinetic agents resisting the inertness of reifying objectifications.<sup>19</sup> Epitomized in Marx’s time by the eighteenth-century French materialists, such purely “contemplative” materialisms, ceding the domains of subjectivity to idealisms/dualisms and thereby alienating everyone and everything not conforming to the rule of the mechanical and the reduced, continue to shape the scientific thinking Deacon justifiably seeks to challenge.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, like Deacon’s unwittingly Hegelian rendition, in the register of a realist naturalism, of the Kantian

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19 Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach”, trans. S. Ryazanskaya in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 156.

20 Johnston, “This is orthodox Marxism”.  
Adrian Johnston, “From Scientific Socialism to Socialist Science: *Natur-dialektik* Then and Now,” *Communism, A New Beginning?*, ed. Slavoj Žižek, London: Verso, 2013.)  
Johnston, *The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy*.  
Johnston, *A Weak Nature Alone*.

conceptualization of life—Hegel’s name is entirely absent in the pages of *Incomplete Nature*—my transcendental materialism is a science-informed materialist position in which the things Deacon labels “absential” are recognized as peculiar realities unto themselves instead of being sacrificed through reduction or elimination by virtue of their foreignness *vis-à-vis* the matter-in-motion of a physics of nothing more than efficient causes.<sup>21</sup>

Deacon arouses additional sympathy in me by adopting what could be characterized, borrowing a term from Alain Badiou, as a “subtractive” approach. With Deacon’s dual allegiances to both (quasi-)naturalist materialism as well as anti-reductivism/eliminativism, he is pushed into embracing a variant of emergentism. Given the further factor of his absentialism, this variant has to be on the strong end of the emergentist spectrum (wherein emergences mark the advents in being of real and really irreducible formations and phenomena).<sup>22</sup> However, Deacon does not standardly represent emergences as additions of positive excesses or surpluses with respect to their preceding grounds of existence. Instead, he claims that, “Emergent properties are not something added, but rather a reflection of something restricted and hidden via ascent in scale due to constraints propagated from lower-level dynamical processes.”<sup>23</sup> Deacon’s focus throughout *Incomplete Nature* is on vectors of constraint generation as the keys to a non-mystical emergentism fully compatible with the scientific treatment of nature. According to Deacon, a subtractive emergentism of the absent (rather than a more traditional additive emergentism of the present) perhaps avoids the very potential for reduction or elimination in that, “Absence has no components, and so it can’t be

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21 Adrian Johnston, “The Voiding of Weak Nature: The Transcendental Materialist Kernels of Hegel’s *Naturphilosophie*,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 33:1 (2013), 103–157)  
Johnston, *A Weak Nature Alone*.

22 Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 138.

23 Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 203.

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reduced or eliminated.”<sup>24</sup>

In line with a number of other thinkers,<sup>25</sup> Deacon rightly decouples the idea of natural evolution from any notions in the vein of optimization, perfection, progress, and so on.<sup>26</sup> He proceeds to link his non-teleological, deflated conception of evolutionary sequences with his absentialist stress on lack and incompleteness—“As scientists and engineers, we tend to focus on the properties that we discern to be most relevant to our abstract sense of a given function; but life is only dependent on excluding those that are least helpful.”<sup>27</sup> The demands and pressures of natural selection require of living creatures only that they survive (not necessarily flourish, thrive, etc.) up to the point at which they manage to pass on their genetic material. This minimal evolutionary requirement of simply lasting (even if just limping along) long enough to reproduce permits sub-optimal beings far from perfection nevertheless to persist in the world (as a German saying has it, *Dumm kann ficken*).<sup>28</sup> In connection with this, Deacon’s absentialism leads him to recommend

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24 Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 204.

25 Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding* (Boston: New Science Library, 1987) 115, 117.

Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 195–196, 205.

Keith E. Stanovich, *The Robot’s Rebellion: Finding Meaning in the Age of Darwin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), xii, 12–13, 15–16, 20–22, 25, 28, 53, 60, 66–67, 82–84, 122, 142, 186–187, 247.

Adrian Johnston, “The Weakness of Nature: Hegel, Freud, Lacan, and Negativity Materialized,” *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion, Politics, and Dialectic*, ed. Slavoj Žižek, Clayton Crockett, and Creston Davis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 162–163, 168–169.

Adrian Johnston, “Drive Between Brain and Subject: An Immanent Critique of Lacanian Neuro-psychoanalysis,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* (2013), special issue: “Annual Murray Spindel Conference: Freudian Future(s).”

26 Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 86.

27 Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 425.

28 Johnston, “Drive Between Brain and Subject”.

an evolutionary-theoretic shift of attention in which, for organisms, what is most vital is the evasion and fending off of the lowest (perhaps zero) degrees of (mal)adaptation and (dys)functionality (rather than a progressive approximation to attainment of some type of perfect optimization).

Particularly from a perspective informed by psychoanalysis, another appealing aspect of Deacon's stance is his emphasis on the centrality of conflict in theorizing emergences. Although I have neither the time at present nor the scientific expertise to do full justice to the details of Deaconian emergentism as meticulously spelled out in his almost six-hundred-page book, I wish to note that Deacon extensively employs throughout *Incomplete Nature* versions of a fundamental distinction between spontaneous (i.e., "orthograde") and non-spontaneous (i.e., "contragrade") dynamic tendencies of material systems (be they physical, chemical, or biological) in his account of different levels of emergent phenomena. More precisely, tensions and clashes between multiple such tendencies are said to be the triggers for sudden, abrupt jumps up emergent levels. In fact, according to Deacon, intra-orthograde conflicts immanently generate contragrade processes. Insofar as he pictures the physical universe as differentiated into a teeming plethora of uncoordinated, unorchestrated entities and systems with distinct orthograde dynamics not automatically in synch with each other—Deacon's vision of material being(s) fairly can be characterized as the Lacanian-Badiouian-Žižekian non-One/not-All of a Cartwrightian "dappled world"<sup>29</sup>—Deacon renders nature "incomplete" by subtracting from it any presumptively hypothesized foundation or background consisting of harmony, integration, totalization, or wholeness.<sup>30</sup>

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29 Adrian Johnston, "Second Natures in Dappled Worlds: John McDowell, Nancy Cartwright, and Hegelian-Lacanian Materialism," *Umbr(a): The Worst*, ed. Matthew Rigilano and Kyle Fetter (Buffalo: Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Culture, State University of New York at Buffalo, 2011), 71–91.  
Johnston, *A Weak Nature Alone*.

30 Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 223–224, 237, 275–276, 472–473, 549, 551.

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Also in connection with analysis, Jacques Lacan in particular has sustained regular recourse to absences, gaps, holes, lacks, splits, voids, and the like as integral figures within his metapsychology (in association with a plethora of concepts such as the registers of the Real and the Symbolic, desire, drive, love, foreclosure, *manque-à-être*, *l'objet petit a*, the phallus, the Other, the Woman with a definite article and a capital W, *le rapport sexuel*, and the subject itself *qua*  $\$$ ). Therefore, Deacon's absentalist recasting of the sciences perhaps reasonably can be seen as partly answering a provocative question posed by Lacan: "What would a science be that included psychoanalysis?"<sup>31</sup> In fact, I would go so far as to say that the basic soundness of Lacanian theory, at least for a materialist unwilling to disregard the sciences (such as Lacan himself), hinges on whether a relation to material being(s) and real causal efficacy can be attributed to the absent and the negative in manners coherently integrated with the natural sciences. Hence, Deacon's absentalist project should be of great interest to Lacanians. Even if they do not find his individual efforts to expand the sciences so as to include and account for absences/negativities satisfying and persuasive, they cannot afford to turn blind eyes to the issues with which he is wrestling bravely.

Before moving on to an expression of the negative side of my ambivalent response to Deacon's *Incomplete Nature*, a couple of additional merits of his position deserve recognition. These involve his fine balancing acts between, as I would phrase it, the scientific and the more-than-scientific as well as the material and the more-than-material. As regards science, Deacon does not allow his strong-emergentist anti-reductivism to lead him into a disguised, pseudo-scientific

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31 Jacques Lacan, "Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse: Compte rendu du séminaire 1964," *Autres écrits* [ed. Jacques-Alain Miller], Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001, pg. 187)

Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1964* [ed. Jacques-Alain Miller; trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977), 7.

Johnston, "Turning the Sciences Inside Out," 105-122.

Johnston, *The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy*.

dualism (or, more accurately, unqualified anti-monism). He carefully maintains a dialectical interplay of continuities and discontinuities between the many distinct layers and strata of nature as these are reflected in the divisions of labor between the different branches and sub-branches of the natural sciences.<sup>32</sup> More specifically, Deacon advocates against basing theories of life and mind on physics as the presumably rock-bottom grounding level of explanation for any and every materialism wedded to the sciences of nature<sup>33</sup> (similarly, he considers ventures, such as Roger Penrose's, to account for sentience and sapience through appeals to quantum physics superfluous at best<sup>34</sup>). However, although Deacon conceives of both the organic and the mental as ontologically as well as epistemologically irreducible to sub-organic disciplinary dimensions, he is careful to insist that his brand of emergentism does not conjure up or entail "some disconnection from determinate physics."<sup>35</sup> That is to say, on the one hand (i.e., discontinuity *vis-à-vis* physics), living and minded beings exhibit degrees of independence from the material universe of efficient causes studied by physicists. But, on the other hand (i.e., continuity *vis-à-vis* physics) and at the same time, these beings by no means can and do drastically violate the patterns and regularities seen to hold for the physical real. Appropriating a distinction from Kant's deontological ethics, Deacon's sentient and sapient organisms always act in conformity with physics' "laws of nature," although they far

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32 Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 155.

33 Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 138.

34 Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 289–290.

Adrian Johnston, "Naturalism or anti-naturalism? No, thanks—both are worse!": Science, Materialism, and Slavoj Žižek," *La Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, (2012) special issue: "On Slavoj Žižek," 321–346.

Adrian Johnston, "A Critique of Natural Economy: Quantum Physics with Žižek," *Žižek Now*, ed. Jamil Khader and Molly Rothenberg (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

Adrian Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

35 Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 480.

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from always act according to intentions directly determined or dictated by these “laws.” I employ these scare quotes because Deacon, correctly in my estimation, believes that some patterns and regularities taken to be inviolable (i.e., to be unbreakable “laws of nature”) on the basis of one or more scientific fields of investigation do not universally hold without exception for all levels and tiers of real being.<sup>36</sup>

As regards matter, Deaconian absentialism, like my transcendental materialism, envisions full-fledged subjectivity as the paradigmatic instance of an immanent natural-material genesis of a denaturalized, more-than-material transcendence-in-immanence. Deacon articulates this theme thusly:

...autonomy and agency, and their implicit teleology, and even the locus of subjectivity, can be given a concrete account. Paradoxically, however, by filling in the physical dynamics of this account, we end up with a non-material conception of organism and neurological self, and by extension, of subjective self as well: a self that is embodied by dynamical constraints.

But constraints are the present signature of what is absent. So, surprisingly, this view of self shows it to be as non-material as Descartes might have imagined, and yet as physical, extended, and relevant to the causal scheme of things as is the hole at the hub of a wheel.<sup>37</sup>

The adjective “concrete” in the first sentence of this quotation signals Deacon’s intention to anchor his absentialist emergentism in empirical determinations of physical being (as per physics, chemistry, biology, etc.). By his lights, the natural sciences uncover the effective existence of multiple processes of self-limitation (i.e., the idea-motif of “constraint” so pivotal for *Incomplete Nature*) internally generated within and between emergent strata of material structures and phenomena. What is more, Deacon construes such constraints

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<sup>36</sup> Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 237.  
Johnston, “Second Natures in Dappled Worlds,” 81-86.  
Johnston, *A Weak Nature Alone*.

<sup>37</sup> Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 484.

as paradoxical incarnations of what is absent by virtue of the dynamics of constraining, as not present due to avoidances, exclusions, suppressions, and the like. The apparent paradox, akin to the Hegelian dialectics at the heart of the conceptual figure of limit per se (here, constraint in general), is that any such incarnation is a presence of absence, a convergence of the (seeming) opposites of presence and absence (as Deacon words it above, “constraints are the present signature of what is absent”). That said, if, therefore, absences are the negatives/negations of presences *qua* material embodiments, then the constraints Deacon claims are intra-systemic self-limitations produced within and out of given configurations of material bodies are (no-)things “in matter more than matter itself” (to paraphrase Lacan).

Of course, as Deacon warns, this “non-material” (what I am labeling as “more-than-material”) quality of “dynamical constraints,” themselves internal yet irreducible to the physical mediums of their instantiations, is oddly similar to but nonetheless crucially different from the immaterial as posited in Cartesian metaphysics. And yet, the relative pertinence of Descartes to Deaconian absentialism is slightly more complicated and nuanced than Deacon’s casual reference in the preceding passage indicates. The second of Descartes’ six *Meditations on First Philosophy* arguably amounts to the most important statement of his theory of subjectivity, the stating of which is one of the essential founding moments of the modern era in its entirety. On a quite defensible interpretation, Descartes slides therein from a verb-like *Cogito* (as in “*Cogito, ergo sum*”) at the opening of the “Second Meditation” to a noun-like *res cogitans* (i.e., a thinking substance envisioned in conformity with a substance metaphysics pre-dating Cartesian modernity) later in the same chapter<sup>38</sup> (a slippage famously denounced as illegitimate by Kant in his “Paralogisms of Pure Reason,” namely, his assault on Descartes-inspired rational psychology as part of his *Critique of Pure Reason*’s “Transcendental

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38 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 17–24.

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Dialectic”<sup>39</sup>). Put differently, Descartes’ shift to talking about a “thing that thinks” amounts to replacing a model of subjectivity as an event (or, more accurately, series of events) with one of it as an entity. In other words, Descartes begins the “Second Meditation” by alighting upon a kinetic subject (i.e., the *Cogito* as a dynamic, event, process, verb, etc.) and ends it with the fixed metaphysical objectification of a static “subject” (i.e., the *res cogitans* as an entity, noun, thing, substance, etc.). In short, the becoming of the *Cogito* is eclipsed by the being of the *res cogitans*.<sup>40</sup>

Although Deacon is doubly distant from the substance metaphysics of Cartesian rational psychology—this metaphysics involves not only an idealist-*qua*-anti-materialist ontological dualism, but also a non-absentialist emphasis on the presence of immaterial substance(s)—he is closer to Descartes than he realizes. More precisely, Deacon’s rooting of subjects in ongoing dynamics of constraining is amenable to being depicted as a non-idealist, quasi-monist narrative concerning the material surfacing of non/more-than-material, *Cogito*-like subjectivity. Such a depiction further underscores the proximity between Deaconian absentialist emergentism and transcendental materialism.

As for the negative side of my mixed response to *Incomplete Nature*, I detect several problems with Deacon’s framework. To begin with, Deacon presents his absentialist brand of strong emergentism as adequately addressing the Chalmers-style “hard problems”<sup>41</sup> so central for debates in Anglo-American Analytic philosophy of mind (i.e., problems about how sentience and sapience emerge from matter).<sup>42</sup> However, it is far from clear to me whether and how he achieves this. Even if I am partly responsible for this lack of clarity due to my insufficient expertise in each and every branch of natural

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39 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A341/B399-A405/B432.

40 Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology*, 12–13.

41 David J. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), xii–xiii.

42 Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 6–8.

science mobilized by Deacon, his evident failure to make a truly convincing case transparent to a scientifically literate reader is troubling. Furthermore, as someone professionally trained in philosophy, I simply do not see, anywhere in the pages of *Incomplete Nature*, direct and complete answers to questions about the transition from non-conscious bodies (whether inorganic or organic) to conscious awareness and/or self-conscious reflectivity.

Instead, what I do see—Deacon certainly deserves partial credit apropos these hard-problem questions—is a careful, painstaking cataloging of many necessary conditions at the levels of the physical, the chemical, and the biological at least making possible (even if not actual) the genesis of sentience and sapience. That is to say, *Incomplete Nature* manages, at a minimum, to get halfway to a robust, exhaustive reckoning of a non-reductive/eliminative sort with the perennial mind-body mystery. But, Deacon’s book nonetheless remains incomplete in a sense other than that signaled by its title—and this insofar as necessary and sufficient conditions are not the same things. On my reading, the in/de-completing of nature artfully and knowledgably effectuated by Deacon amounts to a gratifyingly thorough delineation of how and why the physical universe is a place capable in principle of accommodating within itself entities and events irreducible to the mechanics of the efficient causality of moving bodies alone (for example, the absential structures and dynamics associated with the cognitions, emotions, and motivations of human minds). As the epigraph to the fifth chapter (entitled “Emergence”), a translation slightly modified by Deacon taken from Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, has it, “we need an account of the material world in which it isn’t absurd to claim that it produced us.”<sup>43</sup> And yet, explaining via necessary conditions the non-absurdity of the immanent natural and material emergence of the denaturalized and more-than-material (first and foremost, recursive and reflexive subjectivity as a

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43 Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 143.

Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *La nouvelle alliance: Métamorphose de la science* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1979,) 278.

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transcendence-in-immanence) is not, by itself, tantamount to plausibly explaining via sufficient conditions the actual reality of this emergence.<sup>44</sup>

As introductory logic textbooks spell out, the difference between a necessary and a sufficient condition can be understood by contrasting two different forms of conditional claims: “ $\sim A \rightarrow \sim B$ ” (“if not-A, then not-B”) versus “ $A \rightarrow B$ ” (“if A, then B”). A necessary condition is that without which something else will not follow. In the absence of the antecedent “A” (i.e., “not-A”), a specific corresponding consequent “B” will not be the case (i.e., “not-B”)—in formal terms, “ $\sim A \rightarrow \sim B$ .” By contrast, a sufficient condition is that with which something else will follow. In the presence of the antecedent “A,” a specific corresponding consequent “B” will be the case—in formal terms, “ $A \rightarrow B$ .” My judgment at this juncture is that Deacon’s variant of emergentism tends to identify incompletenesses in the absence of which irreducible kinds of sentience and sapience would not be possible. Worded otherwise, if material nature were complete (i.e., not-incomplete), then more-than-material, denaturalized subjects would not and could not arise out of this world. I can render this formally by letting “C” stand for “complete nature” and “S” for “subjectivity” (the latter in the anti-reductive/eliminative sense of a strong emergentism). Deacon’s “incomplete nature” thus would be formally symbolized as “ $\sim C$ .” Hence, the prior phrasing “if material nature were complete (i.e., not-incomplete), then more-than-material, denaturalized subjects would not and could not arise out of this world” can be symbolically represented as the claim “ $\sim\sim C \rightarrow \sim S$ ,” with the double-negation “ $\sim\sim C$ ” being equivalent to “not-incomplete nature” (i.e., complete nature as itself the negation *qua* logical opposite of Deacon’s incomplete nature). But, as readily can be apprehended here, “ $\sim\sim C \rightarrow \sim S$ ” (i.e., “if complete nature, then no subjectivity”) is not equal to “ $\sim C \rightarrow S$ ” (i.e., “if incomplete nature, then subjectivity”).

Admittedly, certain antecedents sometimes can be both necessary and sufficient conditions at one and the same time.

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44 Johnston, *The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy*.

However, when an antecedent functions as a necessary but not sufficient condition for a given consequent, this entails that such an antecedent has two aspects: First, as indicated in the preceding paragraph, without this antecedent, the given consequent cannot be the case (again, “ $\neg A \rightarrow \neg B$ ”); Second, this antecedent, without other antecedents as auxiliary additional conditions, cannot by itself bring about the given consequent at issue being the case. As regards this second aspect, antecedents “X,” “Y,” and “Z,” for instance, might be required, taken together with “A,” so as to bring about consequent “B.” If so, then, although “A” alone is not sufficient for “B” (i.e., “ $A \rightarrow B$ ” is false), “ $(A \wedge X \wedge Y \wedge Z) \rightarrow B$ ” (“if A and X and Y and Z, then B”) can be true. In this illustration, the antecedent “A” on its own is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the consequent “B,” whereas the collective antecedent-set “ $(A \wedge X \wedge Y \wedge Z)$ ” is the sufficient condition for “B.”

From my perspective, Deacon’s absential incompletenesses of nature constitute some, but not all, of the set of antecedent conditions that, taken together, are the sufficient (over and above merely necessary) conditions for a strongly emergent and irreducible subject qualifying as self-determining, as both autonomous and free-standing. Bluntly stated, subjective freedom proper is equivalent neither to the bare absence of sub-subjective natural-causal determination (i.e., sheer indeterminism as the lone reign of arbitrariness, contingency, and so on) nor to intentional states of consciousness in either the philosophical or quotidian senses of the adjective “intentional” (i.e., whether as the capacity of sentient or sapient mindedness to be “about” other things as its referents, in the philosophical sense of the intentional as referential aboutness, or the teleological directedness of organisms animated by needs, wants, and the like toward yet-to-be-attained objects or circumstances as ends or goals, as in the quotidian sense of the intentional as teleological motivation). The absence of determinism by itself does not automatically equal the presence of freedom; at most, it amounts to there being mere randomness, which is perfectly possible in systems totally devoid of anything resembling the sorts of human selves

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and subjects Deacon wishes to embrace in his framework. Similarly, whether in the technical or everyday sense of intentionality, a creature can be intentional without thereby also being free *qua* self-determining—and this because its intentions, as either referential aboutnesses or teleological motivations, can be heteronomously determined by any number of endogenous and/or exogenous variables amenable to normal causal analyses. *Contra* Deacon, simply being able to call before conscious awareness absences (as states of affairs not present) does not, on its own, establish the efficacious existence of actual freedom as realized by the most denaturalized and self-reflexive dimensions of the subject.

Before proceeding further, I need to voice another line of criticism with respect to Deaconian absentialism. My main complaint in this critical vein is that Deacon too hastily lumps together a disparate assortment of distinct types of non-presences under the terminological big tent of “the absential.” Some of the passages from *Incomplete Nature* quoted earlier already reveal this tendency of his to run roughshod over important differences between the heterogeneous kinds of absences he thereby groups together. And, in the glossary to his book, Deacon defines the term “absential” as “The paradoxical intrinsic property of existing with respect to something missing, separate, and possibly nonexistent.”<sup>45</sup> Although the “missing, separate, and possibly nonexistent” share in common the trait of being non-present (i.e., not materialized in a physical and spatio-temporal *hic et nunc*), this alone does not and should not license ignoring the non-negligible features distinguishing diverse forms of non-presence from one another.

Returning once more to Kant’s philosophy will assist in beginning to elucidate this last reservation of mine as regards Deacon’s *Incomplete Nature*. Immediately before the first *Critique*’s “Transcendental Dialectic,” in the closing pages of “The Amphiboly of Concepts of Reflection,” Kant completes his “Transcendental Analytic” with an analysis of

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<sup>45</sup> Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 547.

four categories of “nothing” (*Nichts*). These four are: one, *ens rationis* (“Empty concept without object” [*Leerer Begriff ohne Gegenstand*]), two, *nihil privativum* (“Empty object of a concept” [*Leerer Gegenstand eines Begriffs*]), three, *ens imaginarium* (“Empty intuition without object” [*Leere Anschauung ohne Gegenstand*]), and, four, *nihil negativum* (“Empty object without concept” [*Leerer Gegenstand ohne Begriff*]).<sup>46</sup>

Indicating how Kant defines each of these negative categories, the *ens rationis* is associated with the universal negative (“no  $x$  is  $\Phi$ ” [ $\forall x \sim \Lambda x$ ]) in logical quantification, namely, “no” or “none” in addition to the “every” or “all” of the universal affirmative (“every  $x$  is  $\Phi$ ” [ $\forall x \Phi x$ ]) as well as the “one,” “many,” and similar non-universal qualifying terms of both the affirmative and negative existential quantifiers (i.e., “some  $x$  are  $\Phi$ ” [ $\exists x \Phi x$ ] and “some  $x$  are not  $\Phi$ ” [ $\exists x \sim \Phi x$ ], with “some” here meaning “at least one”). Kant’s description signals that the *ens rationis*, as an “empty concept without object” (*leerer Begriff ohne Gegenstand*), is the concept of “nothing” in the sense of a conceptual determination precisely of the absence or lack of any corresponding object (i.e., no-thing as no object *als Gegenstand*, as no *Objekt* of spatio-temporal phenomenal experience). In this sense, the prime example of nothing *qua ens rationis* is zero in mathematics (an idea latched onto as of sweeping import by Deacon for his absentism<sup>47</sup> as well as by Lacan and Jacques-Alain Miller in connection with a psychoanalytic conceptualization of subjectivity appealing to Gottlob Frege’s theory of numbers<sup>48</sup>). With his overarching

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46 Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1: *Werkausgabe, Band III*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968), A290/B346-A292/B349  
Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A290/B346-A292/B349.

47 Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 8-13.

48 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, 226.  
Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XII: Problèmes cruciaux pour la psychanalyse, 1964-1965* [unpublished typescript], session of June 9th, 1965.  
Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XIII: L’objet de la psychanalyse, 1965-1966* [unpublished typescript], sessions of April 20th, 1966, June 8th, 1966.

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transcendental idealism's core distinction between noumenal things-in-themselves (sought after in epistemological vain by reason [*Vernunft*]) and phenomenal objects-as-appearances (accessible from inside the "limits of possible experience" [*Erfahrung*] co-constituted by the dual action of the faculties of intuition [*Anschauung*] and the understanding [*Verstand*]), Kant subsumes his noumena, as named by and featuring in his theoretical philosophy, under the heading of the *ens rationis*. Related to this, the other three categories of nothing *als Nichts* are, for Kant, all intra-phenomenal. That is to say, the category of the *ens rationis* is able to contain within itself, when specifically determined as the concept of the noumenal, a mark or indication of what presumably lies beyond the limits of possible experience. By contrast, the remaining three types of nothingness are negations pertaining strictly to the phenomenal, namely, to configurations and contents internal and/or intrinsic to the limits of possible experience.<sup>49</sup>

As for the second of the four categories of nothing(ness), the *nihil privativum*, this is roughly synonymous with the privative *à la* Locke. Kant defines it in a single sentence—"Reality is *something*; negation is *nothing*, namely, a concept of the absence of an object, such as shadow, cold (*nihil privativum*)."<sup>50</sup> As its name suggests, the *nihil privativum* is a privation relative to a positivity: Darkness is a privation of light; Coldness is a privation of heat. Thus, these sorts of negations are parasitic upon already-given experiential/phenomenal contents (light, heat, etc.).

The third negative category, the *ens imaginarium*, refers to Kant's preceding "Transcendental Aesthetic." To be specific,

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Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVI: D'un Autre à l'autre, 1968-1969*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006), 48-49, 56-61.

Jacques-Alain Miller, "Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier)" trans. Jacqueline Rose, *Screen*, 18:4 (1977/1978), 24-34.

Adrian Johnston, *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005, pg. 110-117.

49 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A290-291/B347.

50 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A291/B347.

this nothingness is that of the two “pure forms of intuition,” namely, space as “outer sense” and time as “inner sense.”<sup>51</sup> These formal features of spatio-temporal experience amount to nothing as no-thing (or, more precisely, no object *als Gegenstand oder Objekt*) because, as *apriori* and universal conditions for all intuited contents, they are distinct from any and every particular intuited content (i.e., all determinate objects of experience). Simply put, the forms of intuition are distinct from its contents. Hence, the *ens imaginarium* is identified as “empty intuition without object.”<sup>52</sup>

Finally, the fourth negative category, the *nihil negativum*, is nothing other than a self-contradictory concept. Kant’s chosen example is that of “a two-sided rectilinear figure”<sup>53</sup> (a problematic example, as Lacan’s commentary on the Kantian *nihil negativum* will remark). Another illustration would be the (non-)concept of a square circle. Sticking with this second example, the *nihil negativum* is an “empty object without concept” insofar as the concept’s self-contradiction (i.e., the mutual exclusivity between the concepts of squareness and circularity) annuls it, resulting in a non-concept (one cannot conceptualize a synthesis of squareness and circularity). And, insofar as a phenomenal object of experience is, by Kantian definition, a combination of intuitions and concepts,<sup>54</sup> a non-concept entails a non-object, namely, nothing as no-thing *qua* the void of an inconceivable (non-) object (phenomenological confirmation of this resides in one’s inability to envision mentally, in picture thinking, a square circle as an intuitable content).

In the paragraph concluding “The Amphiboly of Concepts of Reflection” (and therewith the “Transcendental Analytic” as a whole), Kant compares and contrasts the four categories of nothing (*Nichts*) with each other. He states:

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51 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A22-41/B37-58.

52 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A291/B347.

53 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A291/B348.

54 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A92-93/B124-126, A103-104, B137-138.

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We see that the *ens rationis* (1) is distinguished from the *nihil negativum* (4), in that the former is not to be counted among possibilities because it is mere fiction [*Erdichtung*] (although not self-contradictory), whereas the latter is opposed to possibility in that the concept cancels itself [*sich selbst aufhebt*]. Both, however, are empty concepts. On the other hand, the *nihil privativum* (2) and the *ens imaginarium* (3) are empty *data* for concepts [*leere Data zu Begriffen*]. If light were not given to the senses we could not represent darkness, and if extended beings were not perceived we could not represent space. Negation and the mere form of intuition, in the absence of a something real [*ohne ein Reales*], are not objects [*keine Objekte*].<sup>55</sup>

The insurmountable difference between the first and fourth categories upon which Kant insists here already is underlined in the earlier “Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes Into Philosophy,” in which he says, “the *nihil negativum* cannot be expressed by zero = 0, for this involves no contradiction.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, the *ens rationis*, an example of which in the first *Critique* is, as seen above, the mathematical concept of zero, is not self-contradictory, unlike the *nihil negativum* (examples of which include two-sided rectilinear figures and square circles). Arguably, these first and fourth categories, although both concepts (even if one of them, the *nihil negativum*, is auto-annulling), represent two distinct varieties of “emptiness,” one consistent (the *ens rationis*) and the other inconsistent *qua* self-contradictory (the *nihil negativum*). One can, does, and must calculate with zero as part of the coherent conceptualizations of mathematics as a formal science (which, like philosophy itself, operates in the epistemological register of the synthetic *a priori*<sup>57</sup>); Kant can and does conceptually construct the philosophical apparatus of his transcendental idealism in a systematic fashion partly

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55 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A292/B348–349.

56 Kant, “Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes Into Philosophy,” 212.

57 Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, 11–20.

relying upon the non-self-contradictory notion of noumena (as “thinkable but not knowable”<sup>58</sup> instances of the *ens rationis*). Two-sided rectilinear figures and square circles, as neither thinkable nor knowable within the parameters of Kant’s system, do not lend themselves, in Kantian eyes, to comparably productive intellectual labors (although, following Lacan’s indications, non-Euclidean geometries, imaginary numbers, and post-Newtonian physics all furnish potent refutations of critical philosophy’s pretensions to be itself, in its original eighteenth-century version, a universally valid, trans-historical epistemology).

In the second half of the preceding quoted paragraph from the first *Critique*, Kant places the second and third categories of nothing(ness), the *nihil privativum* and the *ens imaginarium* respectively, side-by-side. I already have unpacked much of what Kant conveys here in my prior glosses of these two categories. Specifically as regards the *ens imaginarium*, not only, as noted, does Kant posit a co-dependency between the percepts of intuition and the concepts of the understanding as far as experience and its objects are concerned—he also posits a co-dependency between the pure forms and the object-contents of the faculty of intuition (as testified to by the last two sentences of the concluding paragraph of “The Amphiboly of Concepts of Reflection”). Although, according to the “Transcendental Aesthetic,” space and time are ideal *apriori* conditions of possibility for experience, without real *qua* empirical experiences of determinate spatio-temporal object-contents, these pure forms of outer and inner sense would remain unexperienced and, hence, unrepresented. Therefore, according to Kant, just as there can be no experience of objects without the ideal *apriori* conditions of space and time, so too can there be no theoretical representations of space and time without experiences of spatio-temporal objects.

As for the *nihil privativum*, this second category of nothing is foreshadowed in Kant’s “Attempt to Introduce the

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58 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxxvi-xxvii, A248-249, A284-285/B340-341.

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Concept of Negative Magnitudes Into Philosophy.” Therein, Kant proposes:

A negation, in so far as it is the consequence of a real opposition, will be designated a *deprivation* (*privatio*). But any negation, in so far as it does not arise from this type of repugnancy, will be called a *lack* (*defectus, absentia*). The latter does not require a positive ground, but merely the lack of such a ground. But the former involves a true ground of the positing and another ground which is opposed to it and which is of the same magnitude. In a body, rest is either merely a lack, that is to say, a negation of motion, in so far as no motive force is present, or alternatively, such rest is a deprivation, in so far as there is, indeed, a motive force present, though its consequence, namely the motion, is cancelled by an opposed force.<sup>59</sup>

Of course, this 1763 essay is perhaps best known for the central distinction between “logical contradiction (*Widerspruch*)” and “real opposition (*Opposition*)” with which it opens.<sup>60</sup> In an anti-Hegelian gesture *avant la lettre*, the pre-critical Kant rules out the possibility of contradictions inhering within reality itself. This exclusion subsequently becomes axiomatic for the ostensible proof of the philosophical superiority of the critical epistemology of transcendental idealism via the demonstrative power of the “dialectic of pure reason” (i.e., the “Transcendental Dialectic”) in the second half of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. This is especially evident in the four “antinomies of pure reason” catalyzed by the “cosmological idea of reason,” with the argumentative force of these relying on the assumption that the noumenal being of things-in-themselves, whatever else it might be, is devoid of contradictions. According to this assumption, insofar as the faculty of reason (*Vernunft*) encounters contradictory antinomies, it remains

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59 Kant, “Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes Into Philosophy,” 217.

60 Kant, “*Versuch, den Begriff der negativen Grössen in die Weltweisheit einzuführen*,” 783–784.  
Kant, “Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes Into Philosophy,” 211–212.

out of contact with the ontological real of *das Ding an sich*, stuck shadow boxing in the theater of enclosed subjective cognition with the contradictory constructs and by-products of its own intra-ideational activities.<sup>61</sup>

Particularly by the time of the first *Critique*, the adjective “real” in “real opposition” has to be taken with several grains of salt. As observed, Locke the empiricist, in his characteristically inconsistent, non-systematic manner, remains agnostic about the potential extra-mental reality of privative causes. At least on a Hegelian reading, Kant the empiricism-inspired critical philosopher of transcendental idealism appears to be, so to speak, an atheist rather than an agnostic on this matter. This is true to the extent that he presupposes as an axiom the thesis according to which being *an sich* is free of antagonisms, antinomies, contradictions, paralogisms, and the like. Systematic consistency seemingly would dictate a principled ontological agnosticism on Kant’s part apropos any and every possible determinate attribute potentially predicable of the noumenal being of things-in-themselves, including that of freedom from the sorts of deadlocks and impasses manifesting themselves in thought as logical contradictions and/or transcendental dialectics.

That said, within the constraining scaffolding of Kantian transcendental idealism, what is (empirically) “real” (for instance, real opposition) is not the non-subjective objectivity of thingly beings in and of themselves, but, instead, the passive reception (in a receptivity that is subjectively ideal nonetheless) of spatio-temporal objects of experience at the level of intuition (with the addition of the necessary and universal concepts and categories of the understanding). Obviously, this anti-realist dimension is established by Kant in the “Transcendental Aesthetic” at the very beginning of the first *Critique*, with this section’s insistence on the strict ideality of space and time.<sup>62</sup> Kant later, in “The Antinomy of

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61 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A405-567/B432-595.  
Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology*, 128-144.

62 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A27-28/B43-44, A35-36/B52-53, B69-71.

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Pure Reason,” contends that the rational dialectics swirling around the cosmological idea of reason provide further proof of the exclusively ideal nature of the spatial and the temporal.<sup>63</sup> Again, this purported proof rests on the presumption, repeatedly attacked frontally by Hegel, that being *an sich*, without subjectivity and its mediations, is untouched and unburdened by the negativities of such dialectics. Additional evidence bearing witness to this (dogmatic) ontological assumption of Kant’s is to be found in his above-quoted closing remarks about the four categories of nothing at the end of the first *Critique*’s “Transcendental Analytic”: Only the consistent emptiness of the *ens rationis*, and not the inconsistent emptiness of the self-contradictory *nihil negativum*, is suitable for a conceptual determination of noumena.

But, what happens if one does not accept Kantian transcendentalism? What if, whether prompted by Hegelian or other counter-arguments, one repudiates the anti-realism of subjective idealism as untenable and internally self-subverting or auto-deconstructing? In such a scenario, what becomes of Kant’s meticulous analyses of nothing(ness)? Even if one accepts as decisively devastating the full sweep of Hegel’s sustained Kant critique, as I do, such a critique is far from entailing a wholesale repudiation of the rich resources of Kantian philosophy (neither for Hegel nor for someone like me). Kant’s reflections on nothing(ness) can and should be extracted from the limiting frame of transcendental idealism. In line with the earlier critical engagement with Deacon’s absentialism, I believe that a Kantian-style sensitivity to distinct varieties of the privative/negative is an essential component of a strong-emergentist theory of transcendental subjectivity as itself arising from and being grounded in meta-transcendental layers of pre/non-subjective substances. In fundamental solidarity with Hegel and Deacon, among others, I seek to advance the formulation of such a theory through linking the genesis of the irreducible subject of transcendentalism to specific types of negativities (as absences, antagonisms, etc.).

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63 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A506-507/B534-535.

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In so doing, I conceive of these negativities within the space of a philosophical triangle formed by the three corners of historical/dialectical materialism, realism (including that of Hegel’s misleadingly [self-]labeled “absolute idealism”), and the quasi-naturalism of a self-denaturalizing nature—that is to say, outside the enclosure of the subjective idealism of Kant’s anti-realist, anti-materialist transcendentalism. Moreover, I consider philosophical recourse to both Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis and the natural (especially life) sciences as disciplinary allies in this endeavor to be indispensable.<sup>64</sup>

Perhaps controversially, I interpret the full arc of Lacan’s teachings from the 1930s to the start of the 1980s as unfolding along the lines of the triad of dialectical materialism, realism, and quasi-naturalism (I defend this reading elsewhere<sup>65</sup>). Assuming for the moment that I have plausible justifications for this rather contentious view of Lacan, his explicit treatments of Kant’s categorizations of the negative set the stage for my transcendental materialist furtherance of Deacon’s similar absentalist emergentism. In the third seminar on the topic of *The Psychoses* (1955-1956), Lacan mentions Kant on negative magnitudes twice: first, to insist on Judge Daniel Paul Schre-

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64 Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology*, 269-287.

Adrian Johnston, “Slavoj Žižek’s Hegelian Reformation: Giving a Hearing to *The Parallax View*,” *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism*, 37:1 (2007), 3-20.

Johnston, *The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy*.

Johnston, *A Weak Nature Alone*.

65 Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology*, 270-273.

Johnston, “Slavoj Žižek’s Hegelian Reformation,” 3-20.

Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009, pg. 119-124)

Johnston, “The Weakness of Nature,” 163-176.

Adrian Johnston, “Reflections of a Rotten Nature: Hegel, Lacan, and Material Negativity,” *Filozofski Vestnik*, 33:2 (2012), special issue: “Science and Thought”, ed. Frank Ruda, 23-52.

Adrian Johnston, “The Object in the Mirror of Genetic Transcendentalism: Lacan’s *Objet petit a* Between Visibility and Invisibility,” *Continental Philosophy Review* (2013), special issue: “Reading Seminar XIII: *The Object of Psychoanalysis*”, ed. Thomas Brockelman and Dominiek Hoens.

Johnston, “Drive Between Brain and Subject”.

Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*.

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ber's uses of the German words *Aufhebung* (as cancellation) and *Unsinn* (nonsense) in his *Memoires of My Nervous Illness* as having richer meanings than a Kantian "pure and simple absence, a privation of sense"<sup>66</sup>; and, second, to make a few suggestions about the presenting-while-negating gesture of *Verneinung* (negation) as per Freud's 1925 essay "Negation."<sup>67</sup> However, over the course of three consecutive academic years from 1961 to 1964, Lacan, during a particularly pivotal period of his intellectual itinerary, returns several times to Kant's ideas about the negative; the ninth, tenth, and eleventh seminars lay out a distinctive Lacanian appropriation of this sector of the Kantian philosophical apparatus.

Lacan's most developed and detailed pronouncements on negativity *à la Kant* are to be found in his ninth seminar on *Identification* (1961-1962). Lacan zeros in on the category of the *nihil negativum* ("Empty object without concept" [*Leerer Gegenstand ohne Begriff*]) in particular. To begin with, he observes that Kant's illustration of an "empty concept without object" through reference to a two-sided rectilinear figure is self-undermining. This is because it reveals how the critical philosophy's notion of space is tethered to Euclidean and Newtonian assumptions about it. Rather than being universally *a priori* features of spatiality transcending the history of ideas, as Kant purports, Euclid's and Newton's perspectives have proven to be historically relative and far from absolute. As noted earlier, the past two-and-a-half centuries have seen mathematical and scientific revolutions dethroning the worldviews of the formal and empirical disciplines known to Kant within the confines of his era of the late-eighteenth century. Within the expanded parameters of non-Euclidean geometries, two-sided rectilinear figures are not necessarily instances of Kant's *nihil negativum*.<sup>68</sup>

66 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955-1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1993), 122.

67 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III*, 155-156.

68 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre IX: L'identification, 1961-1962* [unpublished typescript], session of February 28th, 1962.

Related to this, the square root of negative one (i.e.,  $i$  as an imaginary number), to take another point of reference routinely gestured at by Lacan, seems to short-circuit the Kantian distinction between the first and fourth categories of nothing, namely, between the *ens rationis* (“Empty concept without object” [*Leerer Begriff ohne Gegenstand*]) and the *nihil negativum*. As in the *ens rationis*, whose examples include zero and noumena, the square root of negative one can be consistently cognized and employed in coherent bodies of concepts. But, as in the *nihil negativum*, one of whose examples is a square circle, the combination of negative numbers and the operation of the square root evidently brings together contradictory conceptual determinations with no corresponding phenomenal objects of possible experience. If, for instance, both zero and the square root of negative one are equally functional and essential features of mathematics, then Kant’s fashion of distinguishing between the *ens rationis* and the *nihil negativum* is in some trouble.

Many of Lacan’s discussions of Kant during the following academic year, in his tenth seminar on *Anxiety* (1962-1963), are centered on driving home this critique of the Kantian “Transcendental Aesthetic.”<sup>69</sup> However, therein, Lacan indirectly concedes that there might be at least some very limited legitimacy to Kant’s portrayals of space and time (as per the contributions of the faculty of intuition to experience), perhaps solely as theoretical reflections of the spontaneous phenomenology of the most superficial sorts of mundane, quotidian subjective consciousness. In the tenth seminar, the two pure forms of intuition of the first *Critique* (i.e., inner sense as time and outer sense as space) are said to be delegitimized as supposedly eternal and exceptionless—and this insofar as Freud’s momentous discovery of the unconscious deprives the conscious experiences on which Kant’s “Transcendental Aesthetic” is based of their foundational, unsurpassable standing. Worded differently, Lacan’s argument is that Freudian

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69 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre X: Langoisse, 1962-1963*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004), 103.

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psychoanalysis, in challenging the traditional presumption of an equivalence between the mental and the conscious, raises objections to the ostensible *apriori* universality of any depiction of space and time rooted in a conception of consciousness wedded to this old, pre-Freudian presumption. Already during this academic year, Lacan, in connection with this critique of Kant, suggests that his turns to topology and other mathematical resources of more recent vintage than the late-eighteenth century are partly motivated by an intention to forge a non-Kantian transcendental aesthetic doing justice to the unconscious of analysis, with its primary process thinking as different-in-kind from the secondary process thinking characteristic of consciousness.<sup>70</sup>

Coming back to the immediately preceding ninth seminar, Lacan, in the sessions of February 28th and March 28th of 1962, hitches his theory of the subject specifically to Kant's *nihil negativum qua* empty object without concept. He goes so far as to allege that this *leerer Gegenstand ohne Begriff* is the only one of the first *Critique's* categories of nothing(ness) to enjoy any degree of true cogency.<sup>71</sup> Lacan proceeds to rule out both the *ens rationis* and the *nihil privativum* ("Empty object of a concept" [*Leerer Gegenstand eines Begriffs*]) as worthwhile, particularly in relation to a viable theorization of subjectivity.<sup>72</sup> Lacan's reason for not even mentioning the *ens imaginarium* ("Empty intuition without object" [*Leere Anschauung ohne Gegenstand*]) likely is this category's direct reliance upon the account of the spatio-temporal faculty of intuition as per the Kantian "Transcendental Aesthetic" problematized and subverted by psychoanalysis. Despite rejecting three out of four of Kant's negative categories, Lacan complains that Kant underutilizes them in his philosophical corpus as a whole.<sup>73</sup>

If Lacanian subjectivity can be associated neither with the *ens rationis* nor the *nihil privativum*, this means it resembles

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70 Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre X*, 103-104, 326-328.

71 Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre IX*, session of February 28th, 1962.

72 Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre IX*, session of March 28th, 1962.

73 Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre IX*, session of March 28th, 1962.

neither the self-consistency of coherently cognizable concepts like zero and noumena (i.e., the *ens rationis*) nor the simple contrasting absences of phenomena like darkness complementing light and coldness complementing heat (i.e., the *nihil privativum*). Moreover, Lacan's refusal even to deign to mention the *ens imaginarium* indicates his repudiation of recourse to a Kantian-style form-content distinction; that is to say, the Lacanian subject is not (merely) the formal apparatus of a transcendental matrix within which elements are configured. Additionally, it should be noted that Lacan recurrently employs the phrase "leerer Gegenstand ohne Begriff" (empty object without concept) when referring to Kant's *nihil negativum*. Insofar as he brings his conception of subjectivity into connection with this particular Kantian category of negativity, his preference for speaking of an "empty object without concept" probably is motivated by a desire to highlight several facets of the subject-as- $\$$  (specifically the sides of it he subsumes under the designation "subject of enunciation" as different from what is labeled the corresponding "subject of the utterance"<sup>74</sup>). First, the split *parlêtre* is itself self-contradictory (as is the *nihil negativum*). Second, this peculiar (non-)being's self-contradiction arises from it inevitably objectifying itself (i.e., becoming an object through passing into utterances, identifications, etc.), on the one hand, and, on the other hand, simultaneously being unable to pour itself without remainder entirely into these same objectifications (as the kinetic subject of enunciation intrinsically irreducible to the static subject of the utterance despite the interminable, oscillating dialectic in which the former constitutes and is constituted in turn by the latter). Third, as thereby resisting exhaustive decantation into the forms and contents of Imaginary-Symbolic reality, including the "objects" and "concepts" together making up the utterance side of the barred subject ( $\$$ ), the *Cogito*-like subjectivity of the subject of enunciation subsists and insists as an "empty object without concept." As in the case of Kant's *nihil negativum*, this subject's emptiness and conceptlessness

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74 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, 139–140.

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are consequences of a self-contradiction. What is more, this self-contradiction is situated at the very structural core of subjectivity *qua*  $\$$ , as inherently divided and self-subverting (and this in ways uncannily resembling how Kant portrays transcendental subjectivity in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, especially “The Paralogisms of Pure Reason” therein).<sup>75</sup>

In the February 28th, 1962 session of the ninth seminar, Lacan also points back to his fourth seminar on *The Object Relation* (1956-1957). For those familiar with his teachings, it might not be surprising that he does so in the context of parsing Kant’s four-part categorization of varieties of nothing(ness). In this earlier annual seminar, Lacan, as most Lacanians know, introduces a tripartite schema of negatives on the basis of his three-dimensional register theory. More precisely, in recasting Freud’s ideas apropos castration, he distinguishes between “privation” (as Real, an incarnate non-presence dwelling in material being *an sich*), “castration” (as Symbolic, a deficit created in reality by the interventions of socio-linguistic mediators), and “frustration” (as Imaginary, a representational confusion of Real privation and/or Symbolic castration as deprivations and obstacles gratuitously imposed from without—to the extent that the Imaginary misrecognizes the Real as the Symbolic and vice versa, frustration reacts to privation as castration and castration as privation).<sup>76</sup> Lacan’s subsequent redeployment of this triangle of negativity during his 1962 musings involves comparing and contrasting it with Kant’s square of nothings (similarly, in the eleventh seminar, he pairs Kant on the negative with Freud and himself on the castration complex and the phallus<sup>77</sup>). Lacan concludes from this exercise that the triad of privation-castration-frustration itself arises from a sort of *Ur*-privation. He identifies the latter as related to the void of a *leerer Gegenstand ohne Beg-*

75 Johnston, *Time Driven*, 79-119.

76 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre IV: La relation d’objet, 1956-1957*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1994), 25-58. Adrian Johnston, “Jacques Lacan,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2013.

77 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, 252-253.

riff, the *nihil negativum* of a (proto-)subject underlying this trinity of lacks.<sup>78</sup>

Deciphering the riddle presented by this *Ur*-privation brought by Lacan into connection with Kant's empty object without concept requires, among other things, rejecting how Miller and some of his followers understand the significance of Kantianism for Lacanianism. In a collection entitled *Lakant*, Miller *et al* latch onto the fact that Kant's transcendental idealism entails an anti-naturalism. At the level of his theoretical philosophy, Kant objects to all realist and/or materialist ontologies as problematic on critical epistemological grounds. At the level of his practical philosophy, Kant upholds the effective existence of an autonomous rational agency transcendently different-in-kind from the heteronomous nature of the human animal, with its creaturely "pathological inclinations." These authors allege that Lacan adopts the anti-naturalist dualisms of Kant's transcendental idealism, purportedly remobilizing them against the multifarious encroachments of biology and its branches into psychoanalytic metapsychology and analysts' consulting rooms. Miller and company talk about continuing a supposedly Lacanian struggle against naturalism, inspired by Kant, in a contemporary analytic showdown with the neurosciences.<sup>79</sup>

As mentioned a short while ago here, I move against readings of Lacan as a straightforward, die-hard anti-naturalist (such as this Millerian one) on a host of other occasions. Without getting bogged down in rehashing those arguments, I will show momentarily how the primal negativity of a *leerer Gegenstand ohne Begriff* as invoked by Lacan in his ninth seminar can be apprehended adequately only via references to a sizable series of quasi-naturalist moments scattered throughout his corpus. For the time being, I will forego taking the additional step of driving nails in the coffin of any interpretation of Lacan's

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78 Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre IX*, session of February 28th, 1962.

79 Jorge Alemán, "Présentation," *Lakant*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Yasmine Grasser and Adela Bande-Alcantud (Paris: École de la cause freudienne, 2003), 18.  
Jacques-Alain Miller, "Une incroyable exaltation," *Lakant*, 29.

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intellectual edifice as resting upon a transcendental idealist philosophical foundation (as I do elsewhere<sup>80</sup>).

Earlier, I complained about Deacon's tendency to lump together various distinct types of non-presences as being all equally "absential" in his neologistic sense. The Lacanian trinity of privation, castration, and frustration helps bring out the distinctions smoothed over by Deaconian absentialism (as would Kant's four categories of *Nichts* too, not to mention Alexius Meinong's triad of *Aussersein*, *Sein*, and *Nichtsein* as articulated in his classic 1904 essay "The Theory of Objects"<sup>81</sup>). By treating everything non-present (i.e., not materially embodied in the here and now) as absent *à la* absentialism, Deacon runs together the past and the future, the possible and the impossible, the envisionable and the unenvisionable, and so on. Obviously, the realm of the non-present is much vaster than that of the present and contains myriad species and sub-species of different absences. As for Lacan's triad of privation, castration, and frustration, it can be mapped onto his more basic dyad distinguishing between the Real and reality (with the latter co-constituted on the basis of the two other registers of the Imaginary and the Symbolic). Doing so places privation on one side, that of the Real, and both castration (as Symbolic) and frustration (as Imaginary) on the other, that of reality. In light of my preceding engagements with Kant and Deacon especially, I wish to focus in what follows on absences in the Real instead of absences in reality. The latter, loosely and preliminarily speaking, would be lacks or negatives as easily representable non-presences (such as episodic memories of the past or an-

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80 Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, 269–287.

Johnston, "Reflections of a Rotten Nature".

Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*.

81 Alexius Meinong, "The Theory of Objects", trans. Isaac Levi, D.B. Terrell, and Roderick M. Chisholm, *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology*, ed. Roderick M. Chisholm (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1960), 76–117. Adrian Johnston, "Non-Existence and Sexual Identity: Some Brief Remarks on Meinong and Lacan," *Lacanian Ink: The Symptom*, 3 (2002), <http://www.lacan.com/nonexistf.htm>.

ticipatory fantasies of the future, with both of these kinds of representations picturing logically possible states of affairs imaginable by the human mind). By contrast, the former (i.e., absences in the Real) resist or defy capture in the forms and contents of familiar, readily graspable representations (examples of which would include not only square circles and any number of superficial paradoxes, but also, from a psychoanalytic perspective, one's own mortality as well as sexual difference *à la* Lacanian “sexuation”).

One of the conflationations of which the absentialism of Deacon's *Incomplete Nature* is guilty is that blurring the fundamental division between representable and unrepresentable absences *qua* non-presences, namely, between absences in reality and those in the Real. In the ensuing, I will zoom in on privation and the primordial *Ur*-privation of a *nihil negativum* (i.e., the barred *qua* self-contradictory [proto-]subject as an empty object without concept [*leerer Gegenstand ohne Begriff*]), with both being tied to the register of the Real. And, adopting a recommendation by Slavoj Žižek, the Real is to be conceived herein as refracting within itself Lacan's three registers, resulting in a Real Real, a Symbolic Real, and an Imaginary Real<sup>82</sup> (with reference to former Chinese leader Jiang Zemin's doctrine of the “Three Represents,” one might be tempted to speak of a Lacanian-Žižekian theory of the “Three Non-represents”). Deacon, taking advantage of the latitude afforded by the breadth of his category of the absential, allows himself the liberty of addressing such tantalizing topics as epiphenomenalism<sup>83</sup> and “concrete abstraction”<sup>84</sup> (i.e., real abstraction as already theorized before Deacon by Hegel, Marx, and Lacan, each in his own way). Both of these topics involve representable absences within the registers of reality. In addition, Deacon

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82 Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief*, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 80–83.

Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 102–103)

Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 69–70.

83 Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 2, 481–483

84 Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 197–203.

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discourses about every other type of (non-)thing associated with the not-present, from physical constraints to the number zero (some of which involve Real absences over and above those of Imaginary-Symbolic reality). On separate occasions, I take up issues having to do with both epiphenomenalism and real/concrete abstractions.<sup>85</sup> For now, and setting aside these sorts of dimensions (i.e., representable non-presences in reality), the rest of this text will concentrate on putting forward a Lacan-inspired and scientifically compatible quasi-naturalist sketch of materially real absences with causal power but without an unproblematic relationship to direct representation.

So, with reference to two of the companion pieces to the present essay,<sup>86</sup> how does an “anorganicist” reinterpretation of Lacan centered on the mirror stage link up with the Kantian *nihil negativum* as an empty object without concept, *Ur*-privation, and absences in the Real? The concept-term “privation,” as it functions in Lacan’s analysis of the castration complex into Real privation, Symbolic castration, and Imaginary frustration, is trickier than it might appear at first glance. It shelters within itself some of the slippery dialectics of the register of the Real (in this case, convergences and reversals between plenitude and deprivation, fullness and incompleteness).<sup>87</sup> Sticking for the moment to the crudely literal Freudian example, biologically female

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85 Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology*, 269–287.

Johnston, “Slavoj Žižek’s Hegelian Reformation,” 3–20.

Adrian Johnston, “Think Big: Toward a Grand Neuropolitics—or, Why I am not an immanent naturalist or vital materialist,” in *Essays on Neuroscience and Political Theory: Thinking the Body Politic*, ed. Frank Vander Valk (New York: Routledge, 2012), 156–177.

Adrian Johnston, “Misfelt Feelings: Unconscious Affect Between Psychoanalysis, Neuroscience, and Philosophy,” in Adrian Johnston and Catherine Malabou, *Self and Emotional Life: Merging Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Neurobiology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*.

86 Johnston, “Drive Between Brain and Subject”.

Johnston, “Reflections of a Rotten Nature”.

87 Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology*, 145–177.

human organisms, in the (material) Real, are not “missing” a penis or anything else; they simply are as and what they are. Apropos the dimension of the Lacanian Real pictured as the presupposed plenum of a subjective incarnate being, there are no absences or lacks. Instead, with respect to the matters at issue in the psychoanalytic castration complex, there are, from this angle, just vaginas and penises. The vagina is not the absence of the penis, since trying to situate these organs *vis-à-vis* each other in this way is, according to Lacan’s register theory, a category mistake in which a comparison between proverbial apples and oranges is subreptionally transformed into a binary opposition between having and not having, one and zero, plus and minus, etc.<sup>88</sup>

But, of course, Freud and Lacan both consider the committing of this category mistake, in which penises and vaginas go from being apples and oranges to becoming presences and absences, to be a near-inevitability during ontogenetic subject formation as taking shape within still-reigning phallogocentric symbolic orders. Skipping over a number of nuances for the sake of relative brevity, in Lacan’s rendering of the castration complex, the inscription of lacks in the Real by the Symbolic—exclusively through symbolization can something be said to be missing strictly speaking<sup>89</sup>—establishes the very distinction between privation and castration *per se*. As regards a biological female, privation would be the fact that having a vagina entails not having a penis (as the Spinozistic-Hegelian ontological principle has it, *omni determinatio est negatio*). This privation is transubstantiated into castration proper if and only if such determination-as-negation is symbolized as itself a non-determination, namely, as an absence relative to a specific corresponding presence (in elementary formal-logical terms, when a difference between A and B is reinscribed as a contradiction between A and not-A). According to Lacan, “castration” is intrinsically Symbolic—for him, it is always “symbolic castration”—both

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88 Johnston, *Time Driven*, 371–372

89 Jacques Lacan, “Seminar on “The Purloined Letter,”” *Écrits*, 16–17.

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for these reasons as well as because the castration complex thus-reconceptualized epitomizes the more general existential ordeal of the living human creature being subjected to the overriding and overwriting dictates of the big Other *qua* symbolic order with its overdetermining significations.<sup>90</sup>

The central ambiguity of Lacanian privation not to be missed in this context is that, consistent with the dialectical character of the register of the Real to which it belongs, privation simultaneously is and is not an absence, lack, and the like. On the one hand, the material Real, including that of various and sundry human organs, merely is what it is in its raw, dumb facticity. The lone type of negativity attributable to this Real is the basic, fundamental ontological constraint making it such that each and every determinate being is what it is by not being the infinity of anything and everything else. On the other hand, the castrating symbolization of privation as a Real lack, as an absence in the Real, is not dismissible as an *ex nihilo* projection of concepts and categories onto an ontological-material blank slate as featureless and flat. That is to say, the efficacy of symbolic castration partially depends upon determinations in the Real as providing it with already-there (in)tangible hooks on which to hang its signifiers (such as the visible physical discrepancies between male and female genitalia).<sup>91</sup> Such hooks are privations as Real proto-absences, potentially identifiable lacks in excess of the Symbolic that names them as such. What endows these symbolizations of deficits with a surplus of heft and sting is the pre-existence of a Real not so full as to be invulnerable to having holes punched in it by signifiers of castration (or all signifiers as symbolically castrating).

To cut to the chase, I equate Lacan's primordial *Ur*-privation, as distinct from but related to the privation of the Lacanian tripartite castration complex (*à la* Real privation, Symbolic

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90 Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus," *Écrits*, 578-581.  
Lacan, "Guiding Remarks for a Convention on Female Sexuality," 616.

91 Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre IV*, 199-230.  
Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre IX*, session of June 20th, 1962.  
Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII*, 124-130.

castration, and Imaginary frustration), with the multiple bio-material negativities embodied by the barred corpo-Real of the *corps morcelé*, itself the paradigmatic materialization of nature *qua* impotent, not-one, rotten, and incomplete.<sup>92</sup> The immature body-in-pieces, in its helpless neediness (as per “need” in the need-demand-desire triangle), is the primal locus of those “natural” lacks launching this living being into fateful trajectories of denaturalizing vicissitudes (including passage through the castration complex). Furthermore, for Lacan, this *Ur*-privation counts as a realist and materialist instance of the Kantian category of the *nihil negativum als leerer Gegenstand ohne Begriff*. Due to the unstable epistemological and ontological dialectics of Real privation (as just explained here), the proto-absences inscribed in the flesh, blood, and bones of the neonate—these are privative causes of the geneses of both ego and subject—defy consistent, non-dialectical conceptualization. In other words, they would have to qualify as “without concept” (*ohne Begriff*) by Kant’s (pre-Hegelian) criteria of *bona fide* conceptuality. And, as an embodiment of Real dialectics inconceivable within both the limits of the phenomenology of transcendental idealism as well as the framework of positivist/presentist (i.e., non-absentialist) natural science, the negativity of absences in the Real—as observed, Lacan is anxious to preserve causal functions for such lacks—would be foreclosed from consideration by the Newtonian Kant and most scientists as an “empty object” (*leerer Gegenstand*).

Put differently, Kantian epistemology and the spontaneous intuitions of modern scientists would pass over as an inconsistent, self-contradictory concept resulting in the ineffective, inconsequent nothingness of a non-object what Lacan (similarly to Hegel before him and Deacon after him) insists upon as the very foundation of a theory of subjectivity. In terms of the earlier-mentioned Lacanian-Žižekian doctrine of the Three Non-represents (and by contrast with the undifferentiated expanse of Deacon’s catch-all notion

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92 Johnston, “Reflections of a Rotten Nature”.

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of the absential), this ensemble of elements made to cross-resonate with each other by Lacan brings together a Real Real (i.e., *Ur-privation*), a Symbolic Real (i.e., *ohne Begriff*), and an Imaginary Real (i.e., *leerer Gegenstand*). The Real *Urgrund als Ungrund* of Lacanianism *tout court* is a corporeal negativity (as Real) covered over by the spatio-temporal experience of consciousness (as Imaginary) and representable solely through ideational-linguistic contortions and contradictions (as Symbolic).<sup>93</sup> Adequately thinking this in a realist, materialist, and quasi-naturalist fashion compatible with the sciences requires nothing less than a sophisticated ontological reactivation of privative causality as this notion emerges in early modernity (albeit with older historical roots tracing back to ancient debates about whether Evil is a positive reality unto itself or just an absence of or distance from the Good, as Kant signals in his pre-critical essay on varieties of the negative<sup>94</sup> and Schelling tackles head on in his 1809 *Freiheitschrift*<sup>95</sup>).

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93 Johnston, "Reflections of a Rotten Nature".

94 Kant, "Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes Into Philosophy," 221.

95 F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom and matters connected therewith*, trans. James Gutmann (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1936), 26, 44-49.