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Abstract

This paper wishes to follow the injunction given to us from Badiou that philosophy shouldn't dictate the progress in various fields that it's coupled with (science, politics, etc.), and that it should instead be receptive to the 'Events' in these fields. This paper wishes to take the field of science called 'Complexity Science', specifically the idea of 'Emergentism' in it, as an Event that philosophy should be receptive to. In exploring this relatively new field, this paper wishes to draw the properly radical metaphysical conclusions that crop up from such an investigation. Thus this paper's goal is two-fold: it wishes to explore Emergentism as an important new topic for philosophy, and it wishes to explore the new avenues of thought that this science opens up.

The Immateriality of Consciousness and the Immanence of Thought: How Emergence Forces Us to Rethink Metaphysics

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Abstract

This paper wishes to follow the injunction given to us from Badiou that philosophy shouldn't dictate the progress in various fields that it's coupled with (science, politics, etc.), and that it should instead be receptive to the 'Events' in these fields. This paper wishes to take the field of science called 'Complexity Science', specifically the idea of 'Emergentism' in it, as an Event that philosophy should be receptive to. In exploring this relatively new field, this paper wishes to draw the properly radical metaphysical conclusions that crop up from such an investigation. Thus this paper's goal is two-fold: it wishes to explore Emergentism as an important new topic for philosophy, and it wishes to explore the new avenues of thought that this science opens up.

Philosophy isn't a lapdog to the sciences, though it does dwell in its shadow. Philosophy's purpose isn't to clarify the workings of science, or to cloak philosophical debates in the language of science, but is instead to look at advances in science and then see how they force us to rethink our philosophical assumptions and arguments. In this way, science is Evental (as Badiou would say)¹, and philosophy proper should act with fidelity towards these Events. This holds true for metaphysics especially, despite the strange conclusions that may be reached with such a fidelity. This paper plans to take up this insight by examining how advances in what's been called "Complexity Science" force us to reexamine our metaphysical assumptions, specifically due to "Emergence". Though metaphysics hasn't been deaf to these advancements – much literature has been written about complexity science and metaphysics, however opaquely it was done - I don't believe it has drawn the properly radical conclusions from it, as this paper intends to do. Though I will mostly be focused on ontology in this paper, I will also briefly discuss problems for mereology, free will, and the status of scientific laws.

Correlationism and the Ontogenesis of Consciousness

In his book, *After Finitude*, Quentin Meillassoux makes the bold claim that both analytic and continental post-Kantian philosophy fall prey to the logic of “correlationism”². He defines correlation as “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” and correlationism as “thought that maintains the unsurpassable character of the correlation so defined”³. This grounding of thought in the correlate of thought and being can either be seen as the relation between world and being (as is the case in Heidegger) or between language and being (via Wittgenstein). The surprising claim he makes about correlationist philosophy (though I won’t be able to flesh it out here) is that it finds itself in a deadlock with modern scientific statements - it runs itself into contradictions that can’t be accounted for in terms of its own internal logic. The question then becomes, quite simply, do we preserve the correlationist style of philosophy, or do we fight for the possibility of a philosophy that’s consistent with modern science? Meillassoux, rightly, sides with the latter position.

Though Meillassoux doesn’t address complexity science⁴, I believe it offers up the same problems for present-day philosophy. While modern philosophy could be characterized by the primacy of the human-world correlate, with strong physicalism/materialism (especially regarding the brain and consciousness), and a rejection of free will, ‘Emergence’ calls all of this into question. To begin seeing how, I wish to address the idea of the emergence of consciousness, especially through the vector of Adrian Johnston’s book *Zizek’s Ontology*.⁵

The core purpose of Johnston’s book is to elaborate the central metaphysical claim of the works of Slavoj Žižek, the Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity. The core of the theory is summarized by Johnston as follows: “Cogito-like subjectivity ontogenetically emerges out of an originally corporeal condition as its anterior ground, although, once generated, this sort of subjectivity thereafter remains irreducible to its material source”⁶. This is a dense statement, so it’s worthwhile to unpack it: “Cogito-like subjectivity” is precisely the phenomenological, immaterial, “I think” aspect of consciousness; “ontogenetically” simply means “generated ontologically”; and thus the whole statement can be taken to mean “immaterial consciousness is generated/emerges from a material base, but after such genesis, it isn’t reducible to it.” The backbone of this theory is the “chain Kant-Schelling-Hegel knotted together vis-a-vis Lacan himself as this chain’s privileged point de capiton (quilting point)”⁷. How do Kant and Hegel⁸ create the space for such an idea of consciousness though?

The main takeaway from Johnston/Žižek’s interpretation of Kant and Hegel is that Kant, in creating the split between phenomena and noumena, preserved the unity and perfection of nature at the cost of the unity of subjectivity. For Kant, since the human

subject is bound by necessary finitude, the only lack in nature exists in relation to consciousness' attempt and necessary failure at knowing the in-itself - thus the lack is epistemological. Hegel's core philosophical move, in relation to this, was reworking Kant's claim into an ontological one - that is, instead of human consciousness acting as the finite factor in the human/world correlate, Hegel reinscribes inconsistency into the very heart of being. It's not that human knowledge is inconsistent; being itself is inconsistent for Hegel⁹.

This ontologization of Kant's epistemology is what allows Johnston to assign a privileged position to consciousness in his ontology. Given Johnston's basically idealist position, he sees Hegel's 'cleft' within being as being caused by the generation of subjectivity/consciousness generally. This comes from his view that 'apperception precedes perception'.¹⁰ The point of the 'apperception of perception' is that there is no "hidden" in-itself separate from perceptions prior to the subject's constitution - instead, the subject comes into being, perceives itself to be a perceiving being, and then places those perceptions retroactively on to the objects of the world. It seems to me that this is the weakest part of Johnston's argument and that it leads him to false conclusions, such as the privileging of consciousness as a special entity in the world, and the idea that the emergence of consciousness leads to a necessarily idealist position. And it's these properties of his argument that I think complexity science can account for, resolving Johnston's problematic ontological excess.

Searle and Johnston on Consciousness

Before continuing into why I think Johnston's account of consciousness is wrong, I'd like to briefly engage with Searle's comments on consciousness, to further shed light on this debate. Searle says that given a system of objects or parts of an object {a, b, c}, something is an emergent property of that system if it contains properties that aren't reducible to any combination of the elements of that system¹¹. After establishing what an emergent property is, he separates this version into two types: weak and strong emergence, or what he calls 'emergence¹' and 'emergence²' respectively. The separating factor for him is that 'emergence²' properties would have to have causal efficacy in the world that wasn't reducible in some sense to the properties that ground that emergent property. Searle believes that emergence² is impossible and says that all types of emergence are emergence¹ only. This is partly because, though not stated explicitly, Searle thinks only physical objects can have causal efficacy in the world, and that immaterial emergent properties of those objects, as properties, are barred from having such effects. Thus, while emergent properties are interesting to think about philosophically, they pose no problems for science as such (especially as far as consciousness is concerned in the neurological sciences), because they're not objects in any real sense. Though I'd like to come back to this problematic distinction between

objects and properties in Searle's account later, for the moment, I'll return to Johnston's account in the light of Searle's clarifications.

Whereas Searle prohibits the possibility of emergent² properties from the get-go, the account that Johnston gives of consciousness likely falls into this characterization. When Searle says that emergent² properties can't have causal efficacy over and above their material composition, it's unclear whether he means the lower-level material composites (neurons and the like), or whether he means the extra-bodily things that are necessary for consciousness (food, water, etc.), or some combination of both. I suspect that Searle means the first - that the lower-level components are the only ones that matter - meaning that his distancing from emergent² properties is far too hasty.

As Johnston points out, consciousness arises as a result of a person's introduction into the Lacanian "Symbolic" - that is, their introduction into a system of signs, of language, and of some combination of the extra-bodily factors described just above¹². Similarly to how a human zygote can only actualize its potential of being a fully grown human being given adequate environmental factors, whatever that extra-physical property of consciousness is, it depends on environmental factors that ground its possibility (outside of those lower-level factors). Therefore it seems that Searle's account in this light is inadequate: without accounting for these environmental factors that give rise to consciousness, he falls far short of being able to prohibit the existence of emergent² properties (with consciousness being the prime example).

Were we to give Searle the benefit of the doubt, though, and say that his definition of emergent¹ accounts for these environmental factors, it seems that he's still wrong to prohibit the possibility of emergent² properties. Though in this case cultural effects - like language - alongside purely physical objects like neurons both make up the ground for consciousness, the possibility that consciousness has causal efficacy still exists. To absolutely prohibit the possibility of consciousness having such causal capabilities, you would have to account for how a material source is able to generate immaterial properties, and how matter has causal priority over the immaterial - a nonempirical problem that Searle isn't about to account for in his account of emergence. Johnston avoids this problem in his account though, since he contends that immaterial consciousness has such causal efficacy (to what extent this causal property exists is still a matter in need of clarification) - in doing so though, he runs into the 'mystical' idealist problem addressed earlier. The question then becomes: is it possible to have an account of emergence that doesn't fall into the causal pitfall of Searle's account without giving it some sort of quasi-mystical essence?

Causation Between Emergent Objects

The problem with both accounts of consciousness is that they couple an immaterial substance having causal powers with being ‘transcendental’ (Searle, seeing this coupling negatively; Johnston, positively). Just because something is ‘emergent’ doesn’t mean that it’s transcendent - even though the name may seem to suggest that. The term ‘emerge’ seems to evoke something ‘higher’, and the irreducibility of emergent properties seems to point in the same direction, but it’s more useful to think of this immateriality as being embedded imminently within, or ‘on the surface’ (to continue the spatial metaphor) of whatever object we’re talking about.

Consciousness emerges from the brain, its existence is immaterial, but it doesn’t exist “over and above” this ground that gave rise to it, but is instead immanent to it. This characterization allows us to avoid the quasi-transcendental nature of Johnston’s account of consciousness - and whereas his account fell into a certain quietude (in that he wasn’t able to actually talk about what consciousness actually is, only the conditions for its generation), by viewing consciousness as immanent to matter, we’re able to have some hopes of actually studying and understanding consciousness as emergent², instead of just resigning ourselves to studying the effects that gave rise to and effects of consciousness (a trap that both Johnston and Searle fall into).

This still leaves the problem of causal relations open though. This problem can be averted once we begin to think of the emergent products of complex systems as ‘objects’ instead of as ‘properties’ - that is, if we speak of ‘emergent objects’ instead of ‘emergent properties’. To understand why this helps solve the problem, I need to take a brief excursion through Graham Harman’s work, and his idea of ‘vicarious causation’¹³. Harman builds his metaphysics primarily out of the work of Heidegger, and what he claims to be Heidegger’s central insight: that every presentation of an object is coupled with an element of ‘withdrawn’ non-presence. He says that this dualism runs through the existence of every object, such that the presence/nonpresence dualism is the principle ontological future of the world. He even goes so far as to claim that objects exist primarily in this domain of withdrawn nonpresence, with presence existing only in the interaction between objects on the level of their surface properties. If objects are infinitely withdrawn, or ‘subterranean’ to borrow Harman’s term, then it becomes a serious metaphysical problem to account for how objects can have any sort of causal effects on one another.¹⁴ On this point, Harman engages in a speculative argument concerning the mereological makeup of objects. He cleverly remarks that something like an arm can serve as both an object or as a part given the parameters that we view the arm from - the arm as an object becomes a part only when subsumed within the larger totality of ‘human being’. Harman claims that all objects are like this, existing both as object and part at the same time, and claims that objects can only have causal interaction with one another as long as their embedded in some larger ‘object’ of which

they become ‘parts’ of. Thus causal interaction only occurs between parts of a larger object of sorts (which makes sense, considering that Harman ontology considers atoms to be an objects just in the same way that coffee mugs, friends, and football teams may be). This is why it’s so important to consider immaterial emergent products of complex systems as objects - only as existing as objects and parts simultaneously are they able to have any sort of causal interaction with the world. And consciousness can only have such causal relations with other objects as long as it’s an immanent product of the interaction of other objects, because it has to exist on the same ‘level’ as other objects to be able to interact with them.

Emergence and the Need for a New (Meta)Physics

At this point, it would be prudent to review some of the claims made in this paper, because some of the following claims rest on them. First, following Meillassoux, I claimed that the majority of post-Kantian Continental philosophy has been correlationist, and thus has run into problems in being able to properly adapt itself to Events in the sciences - namely, accounts of emergence that have arisen from the domain of complexity science. I then went on to study a specific case of an emergent object - consciousness - in the works of both Searle and Johnston. I wound up claiming that consciousness is ‘emergent²’, immaterial, and immanent to the interactions of lower-level factors, and ‘larger’ immanent ones. Then, in the last paragraph, I claimed that since consciousness is immaterial, it can both retain its nonpresence and interact causally with other objects only if it is considered an object as well, and is consider as both part and whole at the same time. It’s from this end of a heavily qualified view of a type of emergence that I’d like to show consciousness (and any sort of object exhibiting similar qualities) challenges traditional metaphysical views in the ‘Modern’ philosophical tradition.

First, I’d like to address how this conception of consciousness accounts for the ‘correlationist’ diagnosis of philosophy proposed by Meillassoux. Though this account seems to privilege consciousness and thus fall into the ‘correlationist circle’ it escapes for two reasons. First, this account of consciousness that this paper presents doesn’t assign a special ontological status to consciousness, but only claims that there exists at least a single type of object that exhibits the properties that consciousness does. There’s no reason to think that consciousness is ontologically distinct from other objects though, in any philosophically meaningful manner. Secondly, there’s no human-world correlate here, even though I say that consciousness is immanent to the conditions that generate it, because I don’t in any way prohibit studying either ‘human’ or ‘world’ apart from the other (actually, it’s necessary, given that in some sense consciousness exists apart from the conditions that ground it). Thus, if correlationism can be seen to be the primary symptom of post-Kantian philosophy (or even movements that came

after, such as phenomenology, or poststructuralism), then the metaphysical worldview that emergence provides us definitely steps outside of it.

Secondly, I'd like to briefly discuss how this metaphysical worldview affects the current debate over free-will. Given that free-will is generally one of the most discounted ideas in philosophy today, with only a handful of philosophers actually advocating for any type of free will¹⁵, there's always a possibility of suffering intellectual isolation when actively advocating for a view of free will. Still, if the account of consciousness presented here is correct, then free-will is inevitable. Primarily, when someone says that free will can't exist, they either attribute it to the fact that the neurons that make up a consciousness fully determine it and that consciousness can be absolutely reduced to the effect of such neurons, or they say that any action precludes the possibility of free-will due to the fact that the action was undertaken due to the absolute influence of society/culture¹⁶. If every object (including consciousness) exists apart from its relations, then there's no way that consciousness couldn't have some free space in which to act apart from the base that grounds its existence even if it can't actively access this space. Therefore, consciousness - and potentially many other objects - have to have some sort of freedom, by the very nature of their essence.

Finally, I'd like to address how this view of consciousness, and of emergence more widely, affects the traditional view of reduction in science. If consciousness is emergent in the sense of being irreducible to its constituting parts, then the traditional view that every object of scientific inquiry can be broken down into its composite parts for the sake of empirical inquiry is hindered - especially if such consciousness has causal capabilities over and above those composite parts. By this account, consciousness is both irreducible to its parts and also irreducible to any other scientific field - whatever field would be able to study immaterial substances in the first place. The last sentence raises an important point, though: if consciousness is immaterial, can it be studied empirically? The best answer I can give is simply: not currently. Many scientific commentators dealing with consciousness have wanted to avoid the conclusion that consciousness is immaterial for precisely this problem - science, as it exists currently, can only study material objects (and potentially immaterial properties). But this fact doesn't prohibit the possibility of a future science being able to study such objects. Science is dynamic - it wasn't just created in a vacuum the day Bacon wrote his *Organum*, but had existed for centuries beforehand. Bacon (and others) didn't create science, but redirected it, focused it - they simply formalized an already existing discipline. There's no reason to think that some Pseudo-Baconian figure couldn't come about and reorganize our current scientific model into one capable of accounting for immaterial objects. It may not be much consolation to say to the sciences "If we are correct about consciousness, then there is simply nothing that can be done at this historical moment, but continue in the research in the hopes that something may come

up”, and it may not be much consolation to the reader wondering about the questions to say “wait”, but that may be the best we can do at this moment. This view of consciousness and emergence may radically reorient the possibility and scope of science, but this is no reason to fret, but is instead of a call to continue boldly forward into the realms of the unknown.¹⁷

This paper has presented a rather unorthodox, though I believe reasonable argument concerning the repercussions of recent complexity science and its account of emergence, especially in the way that it radically reorients our metaphysical worldview. By focusing on consciousness, as our prioritized emergent object, we have been able to explore some of the strange consequences of ‘emergent²’ objects. This investigation not only caused us to question the scope and condition of our metaphysics, but also to do the same for our current conceptions of science. None of the arguments in this paper are meant to be definitive - the paper as a whole should be taken in a more speculative light. This shouldn’t reduce the possible importance of its claims though. Metaphysics is the grounding of any intellectual pursuit - whether outlined specifically or not - and advancement within it shouldn’t be taken lightly.

¹ See: Alain Badiou, *Being And Event*, (New York: Continuum, 2007). Badiou says that Events reshape the landscape of thought - in this sense it’s similar to Kuhn’s paradigms - but instead of Events being limited to just science, they also exist within the domains of aesthetics, politics, and love. Thus philosophy is not just in the shadow of science, but exists in four long shadows, and its proper action is fidelity to all of these.

² Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of the Contingency*, (New York: Continuum, 2008).

³ Ibid.: p. 5

⁴ He’s more interested in cosmological ‘ancestral’ statements about the birth of the universe and their relation to philosophy.

⁵ Adrian Johnston, *Zizek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2008).

⁶ Ibid.: p. xxiv

⁷ Ibid.: p. xiv

⁸ Schelling is excluded in this analysis for the sake of brevity and simplicity.

⁹ This relationship between Kant and Hegel is present throughout Johnston’s book - in fact, it’s a central theme - but a good highlight of it is at *ibid.*: p. 265

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: p. 136-7

¹¹ John Searle, "Reductionism and the Irreducibility of Consciousness," *Emergence: Contemporary Readings in Philosophy and Science*, ed. Mark A. Bedau and Paul Humphreys (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 69-80.

¹² Johnston, p. 279

¹³ In this account, I'm borrowing pretty freely from both of his major works: 'Tool-Being' and 'Guerrilla Metaphysics' (Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, (Peru, Illinois: Open Court, 2002). and Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*, (Peru, Illinois: Open Court, 2005).) Harman's metaphysics is likely the most complex, though lucid, to come about in a quarter-century, and a true explanation of them would take a paper at least twice this length. I'll save the reader the burden of this tedium, and simply keep to the most important parts.

¹⁴ Notice how the causal problematic that arises from the presence/nonpresence dualism takes the same form as the material/immaterial dualism that's such a problem for consciousness.

¹⁵ PhilPapers, *The PhilPapers Surveys*, <<http://philpapers.org/surveys/results.pl>> (Dec. 14, 2012)

¹⁶ For an alternate account of why this characterization - undermining and 'overmining' objects - is philosophically dangerous, see Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, (Laurel House: Zero Books, 2011).

¹⁷ This discussion about the scope of scientific law and reduction is further problematized by Meillassoux's account of 'hyper-chaos' and in the instability of scientific laws over time in *After Finitude* mentioned above.