

A Response to “Critical Naturalism: A Manifesto” or Manifesto, Teleology, Transgressing Social Constructionism, and the Insistence of the Human

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Abstract

The prior issue of *Krisis* (42:1) published *Critical Naturalism: A Manifesto*, with the aim to instigate a debate of the issues raised in this manifesto – the necessary re-thinking of the role (and the concept) of nature in critical theory in relation to questions of ecology, health, and inequality. Since *Krisis* considers itself a place for philosophical debates that take contemporary struggles as starting point, it issued an open call and solicited responses to the manifesto. This is one of the sixteen selected responses, which augment, specify, or question the assumptions and arguments of the manifesto.

Keywords

Critical naturalism, Critical realism, Pragmatism, Frankfurt school, Critical theory

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A Response to “Critical Naturalism: A Manifesto” or Manifesto, Teleology, Transgressing Social Constructionism, and the Insistence of the Human

Aldo Kempen

Rethinking the space of the natural in critical theory also demands a critical relation to the formal features of philosophical inquiry. While “Critical Naturalism: A Manifesto” seeks to transcend dualistic forms of thinking (2022, 110), and aims to rethink the status of naturalism (2022, 108) in a) its teleological restructuring the inadequacies of critical theory, and specifically post-structuralism, and b) its specific discursive (i.e manifesto) form, it reintroduces the dualistic humanism it seeks to overcome. In order to live up to the aims that Critical Naturalism sets for itself it needs to rethink the form through which it expresses itself, and the positionality and meta-philosophical commitments that this form interpellates.

Critical Naturalism is situated in a surge of philosophical “turns” towards science and ontology. As the world changes at an ever-quicker pace, philosophers are “gasping for lexical oxygen” (Zammito 2021, 302) to help us make sense of this bustling conjuncture. From new to neo to vibrant materialisms (e.g. Braidotti; Bennett; Simon), from agentic to object-oriented realisms (e.g. Barad; Bryant), from biologisms to naturalisms (e.g. Grosz), a swath of “new” theories has emerged in the last ten to fifteen years. While different in their aims and (ontological) commitments, almost all share a dissatisfaction with “social constructivism,” a desire to reorient the (exceptional) status of the human, and a claim to “re-engage with the material, real, or biological. Critical Naturalism’s description of the pitfalls of critical theory, its call of urgency, its critique of the figure of the human, and its description of social constructivism, shares similarities with these coeval turns. Beyond these more structural similarities, what it shares with these recent theories (especially through its manifesto form) is an insistence on and desire for the “new” and a certain rejection of the “old.”

A claim levelled against these turns is that the “new” of these theories is founded upon reading “a false and reductive history” (Ahmed 2008, 24) of feminist theory. Where these turns signal a lack, Ahmed notes that there is a rich (feminist) history of engaging with the biological, bodily, and real (e.g. Briscoe; Birke et al.). This holds true not only for feminist theory but also for post-structuralist theorizing (e.g. Conley). Adding to this, Jonathan Basile notes how this reductive reading “is not to offer insight [...] but [...] to create the semblance of progress”

(2018a, 25) made necessary by “the academico-capitalist forces driving these ‘innovations’” (2018b, 1). They flag how these recent authors reinstate certain borders (such as borders of difference between their theory and previous ones) in order to create the possibility of transgressing them. This leads Basile to claim that “the very concept of novelty at work in the formation of [these] field[s] [...] fundamentally compromises its anti-humanist project” (2019, 4) as it presupposes a naive concept of difference and a humanist teleological conception of academic and philosophical progress.

Critical Naturalism, in its current formulation, could be seen as falling prey to some of the same logics. When surveying the pitfalls of contemporary “social science and philosophy” (111) and specifically “abstract social constructivism” (111) specific authors are rarely cited, and the fields are taken as homogenous, monolithic entities. Here, social constructivism is, mistakenly, reduced to a dualism. Moreover, when an author (or in this case a research collective) is mentioned that should be representative of social constructivism, a quite radical outlier is cited (i.e. Laboria Cuboniks). As such, it constructs a straw man in contrast to which it can leverage its own newness and necessity.

This somewhat reductive reading ties into the general tone of the manifesto which seeks to build urgency: The manifesto genre introduces its own necessity through the construction of a lack or crisis that needs to be supplemented or superseded. The manifesto introduces a double crisis – one in the world and one in theory. While it claims that “a radically new beginning does not mean suppressing the past” (Critical Naturalism 2022, 119), it suppresses some of the rich histories of theorizing in order to promote its own newness.

Approaching the manifesto through its tone allows us to glean something about its ontological commitments. While it aims to strive past “the nature-culture and mind-body dualisms that have long blocked critical inquiry” (Critical Naturalism 2022, 113), and seeks a situated approach that researches the differential constitution of these concepts in their continuity, it again commits to a specific, although revamped, ontology. Now, rather than determining nature in a static way, nature (and culture) is defined as malleable, mutable, and contingent (Critical Naturalism 2022, 109). Moreover, forms of science are taken as “good science” that underline malleability, dis/unity, and situatedness (Critical Naturalism 2022, 109). While it highlights an ontology of process and plurality, this determination of ontology, in its univocal

proclamation and stringent tone, itself is neither pluralistic nor a process. It remains a non-pluralistic determination of the real. In this way it is following the tone of philosophy that Derrida describes as: “the form of a going-one-better in eschatological eloquence, each newcomer, more lucid than the other, more vigilant and more prodigal too, coming to add more to it: I tell you this in truth; this is not only the end of this here but also and first of that there, the end of history, the end of the class struggle, the end of philosophy, [...], the end of the earth, Apocalypse Now [...].” (Derrida 1984, 20).

Put differently, in its teleological form, tone, and the univocal ontological pronouncements this form interpellates, “Critical Naturalism” remains tethered to the logocentric and dualistic discourse of Western metaphysics it aims to overcome.¹ As such, we can see how “Critical Naturalism” has overlooked the forms of practice (of philosophical inquiry itself) which made possible their claims about the nature of nature and culture.

Fortunately, there is a rich history of different praxes of philosophy beyond this eschatological proclaiming. In *The Movement of Showing*, Johan de Jong describes movement as a key formal characteristic of the thought of Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida. He signals: “what exceeds the oppositions of reflection is their ‘own movement,’ and the task of philosophy becomes tracing the immanent self-development or the ‘movement of the concept’ [*Bewegung des Begriffs*]” (xix). Here, philosophy is more than a (binary or dualistic) set of arguments and counterarguments. The formal features and the experiential qualities (the movements and developments in and of the text) become part and parcel of the philosophical inquiry. As such, it underlines how experimenting with the form and praxis of philosophy is paramount for any timely intervention critically dialoguing with the philosophical legacy of humanism and dualisms and, thus, also for Critical Naturalism.

Notes

1] Which is again underscored by the fact that the manifesto only cites Western sources, overlooking native or indigenous scholarship that has been highlighting different (non-dualist) cosmologies for centuries (e.g. Tall-Bear; Rosiek; Snyder; Pratt). Again the manifesto is analogous to the turns in which it is situated as this critique has also been levelled against the new, neo, and vibrant materialisms.

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Biography

Aldo Kempen is a doctoral student at Open University of the Netherlands. In his PhD research, he critically assesses the rise of new materialism through the lens of contemporary French philosophy. Previously, Aldo was a Visiting researcher at the Institut für Kunstwissenschaft und Ästhetik (IKAE) at the University of the Arts Berlin (UDK). Currently, Aldo is a Fulbright Fellow at the History of Consciousness department of the University of California Santa Cruz. Here, he is researching the meta-philosophical implications of contemporary materialist ontology under the supervision of Karen Barad.