

Towards a Dialectical Naturalism: A Response to “Critical Naturalism: A Manifesto”

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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

Naturalism, Hegel, Normativity, Critique, Marxism

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Towards a Dialectical Naturalism: A Response to “Critical Naturalism: A Manifesto”

Jensen Suther

The manifesto for a “Critical Naturalism” recently published in *Krisis* is an important call for a concerted effort to develop a form of social critique adequate to the challenges of our moment. The authors invite those of us working in normative philosophy and critical theory to consider the potential of a renovated *naturalism*, which will allow us to theorize “nature” anew – neither as a mere romantic residue best discarded nor as a “resource” to be endlessly exploited. Rather, Critical Naturalism understands nature as the material basis of social *life* and thus as an integral part of the intersubjective reality we are trying to sustain.

The authors argue that a naturalistic turn in critical theory will alone enable us to effectively contest the ongoing “administration of catastrophe” by governments across the globe, and to rationally reassess our responses to, for example, the pandemic and climate crisis. According to Critical Naturalism, such crises represent the return of the repressed. In treating nature as an object outside of us which we mastered long ago, we neglect our own embodiment in the natural world. Consequently, we inadvertently unleash forces that undermine the very “mastery” we are supposedly exercising – like a virus we allow to proliferate through our own institutionalized indifference to the environmental consequences of advanced industrial production. According to the manifesto, contemporary critical theory must overcome its narrow focus on the “normative justification and political effects” of our models of critique and expand its remit to encompass the question of the *material* conditions of social freedom.

The best way, in my view, to express solidarity with those engaged in this important theoretical struggle, and to acknowledge the merit of their work, is not simply to admiringly restate points of agreement, but to highlight potential weak spots, ultimately in order to strengthen and advance the project. It is in such a constructive-critical spirit that I identify below two significant limitations of the critical naturalist view – one philosophical in nature, the other political.

- I. *A Missing Link*: A subtle but important symptom of the problem lies in the authors’ way of talking about human development. According to their view, we are born “biological organisms” that, through a process of socialization, *become* “social and cultural agents” irreducible to the “nature” we share with the other animals (111). In another

passage, the authors argue that “what defines the sociality of human life is a transformation of the first nature of human organisms into a second nature” (117). Yet this “dual-aspect” account of human being gives rise to a tangle of conceptual difficulties. If we are born mere animals, what renders us susceptible to the process of socialization? A dual-aspect approach does not articulate the “link” between animality and rationality so much as “leap” over the gap between them that it leaves in place. On my Aristotelian-Hegelian view, which builds on the work of Sebastian Rödl and Andrea Kern, we are born distinctively rational animals, with the *embodied* potential to learn to be self-conscious subjects. This “transformative” rather than “additive” position – to invoke philosopher Matthew Boyle’s distinction – requires that we understand human life not as animality *plus* rationality but as a rational *form* of animality, not shared by the other animals. Human infants cannot successfully be the kind of *animals* they are unless they are initiated into the practice of giving and asking for reasons. This means that there is no “highest common factor” between us and the other animals, since our biological integrity itself hinges on our ability to give reasons for our actions and beliefs that other rational agents can share. According to my transformative perspective, our first, biological, nature just is our capacity for acquiring a second nature.

It could be that the proponents of Critical Naturalism would ultimately affirm this view, but many of the formulations in the manifesto remain ambiguous. For example, the authors rightly seek to overcome the antinomy of “biological reductionism” and “social constructivism,” grasping “health as well as the body as *both* social constructs *and* something irreducible to social construction” (111). Yet, arguably, this already concedes too much to both constructivism and reductivism in assuming that rationality is extra-biological and that our social “essence” is a matter of construction. To take an example, there are no discrete, even notionally separable “biological” dimensions of human reproduction. We reproduce ourselves *biologically* precisely through the *normative* form of our kinship relations. Biological dimorphism is not the highest common factor between us and the other animals, since sexual reproduction in our case cannot be considered in abstraction from our historical understanding of how we *ought* to reproduce – that is, how the family ought to be structured, how children ought to be reared, and so on.

II. *A Missing Category*: I mentioned above that the authors also concede too much to the constructivist view. This is the perfect juncture to turn to the second limitation of Critical Naturalism, in order to address the larger political stakes of the difference between an additive and a transformative understanding of rational animality. As noted, the transformative view conceives rationality as a distinctive way of being an embodied organism, not as something “over and above” organic form. This means that what counts as flourishing for animals like us is a matter of what we *take* to count as flourishing. Yet this is not a matter of free-wheeling “social constructivism,” whereby whatever we take to be true *is* true. It is rather a matter of what Hegel grasps as the progressive *justifiability* of our historical forms of production and reproduction. We learn what truly counts as flourishing, and which reasons can genuinely circulate in a form of life *as* reasons, through a historical process of *trying to satisfy our desire to flourish* (ultimately, our desire for social freedom). Past, failed forms of life thereby come to function as partial determinations of what success would require. This raises the question of the task of a critical theory of the present.

As the authors rightly note, “for a naturalist critical theory, the various normative, epistemological, and empirical contributions to social critique are not enough. What matters is also the reconstruction of the criticized state of affairs” (120). While the term “capitalism” does occasionally appear in the manifesto, it is not a fundamental category in the authors’ analysis, which focuses instead on “neoliberalism.” The authors condemn the neoliberal dismantling of the welfare state and identify its revitalization as one of their core political aims. Yet in my view, this account suffers from a major blind spot: Marx’s critical theory of capitalist production. As Marx shows, the way social wealth is *distributed* is fundamentally dependent on the way it is *produced*; the wage form of modern labour, for example, entails the private ownership of the means of production. Moreover, the authors fail to consider the systemic reasons for the repeal of the welfare state in the 70s and 80s: the rise in wages and the rate of employment led to a proportional decrease in profits and capital investment, which threatened to curb growth and to destroy jobs. In other words, a return to the welfare state would engender new crises while leaving untouched the underlying capitalist relations of production. Because the Critical Naturalist view is irresolute in its conceptualization of

the relationship between biological and rational form, it is not fully free to rethink the normative criteria for our biological reproduction. In sharp contrast, the transformative view I sketched above shows that not only the form of distribution, but the very form of production itself, must be subject to rational reassessment and revolution.

In a collaborative effort, philosopher Martin Hägglund and I argue in recent and forthcoming work that the “missing link” and the “missing category” identified above can be recovered by a naturalism that is not only critical but also *dialectical*. On the account that we are developing, a resolute naturalist view must be (1) *transformative* in its conception of rational animality, and (2) *radical* in its critique of the capitalist form of life.

Biography

Jensen Suther received his PhD from Yale University and is currently a Junior Fellow in the Harvard Society of Fellows. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in a range of academic and public-facing venues, including *Representations*, *Modernism/modernity*, *b2o*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. He is currently working on two books—*Spirit Disfigured* and *Hegel's Bio-Aesthetics*—which explore Hegel's legacy for Marxism in aesthetic, political, and philosophical contexts.