Non-reductive continental naturalism in the contemporary humanities: Working with Hélène Metzger’s philosophical reflections

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Abstract
This article engages with the philosophical reflections of the French historian of science Hélène Metzger (1886–1944) in order to develop a vocabulary for understanding the rise of non-reductive Continental naturalism in the contemporary humanities. The bibliography of current naturalist approaches in the arts and the human sciences is still in the making, but it is altogether clear that the trend is not scientist or historicist or relativist. This epistemological diagnosis refers us to Metzger, who found herself surrounded with the logical positivism of the Wiener Kreis, on the one hand, and the historicism of her French colleagues, on the other, as well as with the infiltration of the history of science by a chronological empiricism. In this article I will take the most recent book of Vicki Kirby – Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large from 2011 – as an exemplary case of non-reductive Continental naturalist scholarship in the humanities today and by reading it through the concepts of Metzger, I will demonstrate how this type of research leads to refreshing insights in what constitutes positive humanities knowledge and what is the role of the a priori in the field.

Keywords
humanities, Vicki Kirby, Hélène Metzger, naturalist humanities, non-reductive Continental naturalism

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When we take ‘naturalism’ to stand for the reduction of culture to nature, nothing seems to be further removed from the humanities. Naturalism as physicalism or crude materialism appears as compliant with the exact sciences and not with their so-called soft counterpart. Nevertheless, critical neo-disciplines within the arts and the human sciences are also predicated on a nature–culture split. Since the naturalization of women and other Others has led to their exclusion from subjectivity (Lloyd, 1993), women’s and gender studies, queer studies, and ethnic and postcolonial studies have developed a reduction of nature to culture. We have to acknowledge that this disciplinary boundary work can only be affirmed when a classificatory logic, based on C. P. Snow’s famous thesis of the ‘Two Cultures’ (Snow, 1971; 1971), guides us. Maybe naturalism need not translate into scientism and it might not be altogether alien to the arts and the human sciences either.

The increasing attention for ‘new materialist’, ‘neo-vitalist’ and ‘eco(philo)sophical’ approaches in the humanities in particular forms the starting point of this article (cf. Mullarkey, 2003: 64). Their common denominator is ‘non-reductive Continental naturalism’, as John Mullarkey has coined it. Physicalist David Papineau (1993: 1) has claimed that ‘nearly everybody nowadays wants to be a “naturalist”, but the aspirants to the term nevertheless disagree widely on substantial questions of philosophical doctrine’. Mullarkey holds the opinion that disagreements among contemporary naturalists and between naturalists of the past and the present do not pose a problem that is in need of a solution. Contra the analytic tradition that can also be found in the work of Penelope Maddy (2000: 114), who has claimed that ‘[a]ny discussion of naturalism these days is – overtly or covertly – an attempt to define the term’, Mullarkey (2006: 4) postulates a diversity of contemporary Continental philosophical naturalisms that converge in ‘the rejection of transcendence (of Intentionality, of Being, of Language, of the Other)’. These naturalisms ‘differ from earlier generations by acknowledging rather than rejecting their own philosophical heritage’ (ibid.), the philosophical heritage that has been canonized as transcendental included.

His main proponents Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou, Michel Henry and François Laruelle put forward ‘an ecstatic naturalism that restores value to levels of existence that are irreducible to classical physics’ (Mullarkey, 2006: 5; original emphasis). However key, the affirmation of the role and place of the natural sciences in Continental philosophy does not exhaust the new naturalism. This specific naturalism pertains to a specific take on

... the question of ontological monism: if there is nothing ‘beyond’ the world, no ‘arrière monde’, then there can be no duality, no two-worlds view. ... Dualism is the enemy. ... Ontologically speaking, for materialist systems, there is no fundamentally different kind of being (substance, process, or property) outside the system, and indeed both representation and biology here would be of the same ultimate stuff as matter. (Mullarkey, 2006: 7; original emphases)

Besides a horizontal approach to nature and culture, this monism translates into ‘a focus on how immanence relates to change’ (Mullarkey, 2006: 8). Change, here, pertains to metaphilosophical change (the history of philosophy, epistemology) and to change within the system, of which metaphilosophy is part (ontology). It is owing to a
consistent, but diverse, implementation of an immanent take on change that Deleuze, Badiou, Henry and Laruelle are said to affirm their philosophical heritage and that Mullarkey embraces the disagreements alluded to as transversalities instead of problems. Such disagreements

\[\ldots\] induce \ldots people to transverse and permeate the organized space of subjectivity, of all subjective territory, and venture into the inestimable space of transversality, where learning and metamorphosis can be dynamic and limitless. (Reynolds, 2003: 5)

In other words, the plane from which ontologically monist work is done deviates from the fixed Subject, whether Cartesian or critical (i.e. Kantian or identity-political). A renewed acknowledgment of the Death of the Subject would be too quick though. Mullarkey tackles the question of change through the Bergsonian virtual–actual coupling that tries to think the new in other than oppositional terms. Mullarkey affirms that ontology (virtuality) and epistemology (actualized standpoints) envelop one another and departs from approaches that postulate academic change as a Kuhnian one-way track that starts from epistemology and, consequently, produces its own reductive approach. After all, Thomas Kuhn (1996[1969(1962)]: 111) has famously compared the paradigm shift with a gestalt switch, claiming that ‘[w]hat were ducks in the scientist’s world before the revolution are rabbits afterwards’. Not only did this revolutionary stance announce an oppositional ‘new’ (epistemological change implies incommensurability), but also did it implement dualism even further by suggesting that the visual gestalts and all other ‘things’ are muted in the transition (ontological change follows from epistemological change). What we encounter in the work of Mullarkey is a full-fledged ‘onto-epistemology’, a proposal that does not want to ‘privileg[e] … epistemological issues over ontological ones’ (Barad, 1996: 162). Epistemology and subjects both lose their status as privileged vantage points in this context, but this does not imply a reductive naturalism, since ‘[h]aving a place in nature does not spell a reduction of humanity as much as an explanation, one that provides us with a meaningful place’ (Mullarkey, 2003: 64).

Proceeding onto-epistemologically, the new naturalism is as much Mullarkey’s object of study as it is an ambition that he shares with the authors that he discusses. As such, an onto-epistemological study is itself ontologically monist; it is not about ontological monism as a philosophical position in a classification. Onto-epistemologists are interested in how words perform with (non-)humans and things and how this immanent performance produces ‘marks on bodies’ (Barad, 2003: 824), that is, temporary sedimentations like subjective vantage points and research outcomes. Vicki Kirby underlines this point in Quantum Anthropologies, meanwhile implicitly adding Jacques Derrida to Mullarkey’s list of non-reductive Continental naturalists:

By taking Derrida’s notion of an ‘open system’ to its logical conclusion, the senses of particularism – whether individual subjects, objects, words, methodologies, or even systems – lose their identifying outlines as entities or atomic individuations that communicate, or relate to each other, with causal effect. Instead they can be read as different expressions of the same phenomenon. A consequence of this condensation, this concretion or différence, is that grammatology becomes a ‘positive science’ for Derrida. (Kirby, 2011: viii)
Following this line of thought, writing, in the Derridean humanities, but also commonsensically, literarily, or pertaining to the natural sciences, becomes an inclusive practice that does not allow for privileging the epistemological. After all, such a representationalist bias would not allow for reaching the above-mentioned ‘same phenomenon’.

Discussions of naturalism in the contemporary humanities have not always been in line with ontological monism and this evaluation itself has stirred fierce debate (see, for example, Ahmed, 2008; Van der Tuin, 2008; Davis, 2009; Sullivan, 2012). In other words, the position of the historian or philosopher is of great importance for a study of non-reductive Continental naturalism in the humanities. In his important book, Mullarkey positions himself in the new naturalism. This is not a presentism, because (the philosophical heritage of) the four thinkers that his work zooms in on is never fully stable or even stabilizable; both present and past are freed from what we could call ‘classifixation’. Any positional epistemology presupposes schisms in thought and between subject and (theoretical) object and will, therefore, end up missing the way in which an approach is generated and remains generative, whereas the process that allows for positions to actualize can be reached when the right onto-epistemological entry is chosen. One needs to crawl underneath or place oneself before the actualization of a thought in order to encounter ‘the condition of the “passage” of every particular present’ (Deleuze, 1991[1966]: 56) as we will later see. But before we formalize the methodology, let us first move from the realm of philosophy to non-reductive naturalism in contemporary humanities scholarship more broadly. After all, this might still seem to be a quite oxymoronic conjunction.

**Naturalist humanities an oxymoron?**

Non-reductive Continental naturalisms in the contemporary humanities want to break through politics of recognition. The most basic claim coming out of new materialism, neo-vitalism and eco(philo)sophy is that such politics are based on a recognized ‘lack’ and result in a call for inclusion. This is a project that will forever fail, the naturalisms claim, because it does not change any of the existing parameters. In the context of feminist neo-vitalism, Elizabeth Grosz (2010: 154) has argued that ‘[t]he problem is not how to give women more adequate recognition (who is it that women require recognition from?), more rights, or more of a voice but how to enable more action, more making and doing, more difference’. The plea here is to rework the heritage of both modernist equality feminism and postmodernist identity-political feminisms, because neither will truly revolutionize (sexual) difference. In more general terms, Claire Colebrook has stated that

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\ldots \text{[i]f man is that matter who, through life, can give himself form, turn back, and then recognize himself as the very eminence of life, woman is a becoming who does not go through time to differ from herself but remains without a relation. \ldots In contrast with man, ‘woman’ is a becoming that is not the becoming of a subject prior to its relations, nor is it a becoming toward realization. (Colebrook, 2008: 81; original emphasis)}
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Colebrook wants to free (political) thought from all sexualized, racialized and otherwise naturalized humanisms/anthropocentrisms (see also Braidotti, 2006). It is argued that the
Cartesian cogito, Kantian representationalism and all oppositional identity politics have to be shifted in order for scholars to be able finally to think ‘what life is’ such that it yields signification [... since one can only have signifiers – a system of ordered relations – if there is already a potential in life for the perceived to refer beyond itself’ (Colebrook, 2004: 286; original emphasis). Cartesian and Kantian Subjects alike as well as modern and postmodern subjects leave the word/world and nature/culture dichotomies firmly in place, whereas considering the latter horizontally can explain the generation of all canonical and non-canonical subjectivities.

Going back to our historical and epistemological terms, contemporary humanities and arts scholars that work from a non-reductive Continental naturalism aim at breaking through naive empiricism as well as the seemingly elaborate social constructivism, that is, they demonstrate how the two sides of the so-called ‘Science Wars’ share assumptions (Fraser et al., 2006; Alaimo and Hekman, 2008; Coole and Frost, 2010; Bolt and Barrett, 2012; Dolphijn and Van der Tuin, 2012; Ingold, 2012).² It is argued that allusions made to dualism are to be avoided should one wish to shift the naturalizing gesture of matter/life/environment made passive as well as the reverse-reduction of everything to culture. Karen Barad writes:

... the conceptualization of materiality offered by agential realism makes it possible to take account of material constraints and conditions once again without reinscribing traditional empiricist assumptions concerning the transparent or immediate givenness of the world and without falling into the analytical stalemate that simply calls for a recognition of our mediated access to the world and then rests its case. (Barad, 2003: 832)

Barad’s ‘agential realism’, which is another non-reductive Continental naturalism burgeoning in the humanities (see, for example, Colls, 2007 and Parkins, 2008), calls for making an effort to genuinely put into action Donna Haraway’s 1988 analysis of empiricist totalization and social constructivist relativism as non-exhaustively dichotomous. And, indeed, Haraway developed her ‘situated knowledges’ with the goal of exchanging epistemological definitions of objectivity founded on positionality for onto-epistemological approaches that are worthy of objects as ‘material-semiotic actors’. She writes:

[O]bjectivity cannot be about fixed vision when what counts as an object is precisely what world history turns out to be about ... [I intend] to portray the object of knowledge as an active, meaning-generating part of apparatus of bodily production, without ever implying the immediate presence of such objects or, what is the same thing, their final or unique determination of what can count as objective knowledge at a particular historical juncture. (Haraway, 1988: 588, 595; original emphasis)

Just like Barad suggests, we are to leave behind assumptions of pre-existing things that are to be experientially evidenced, but must not exchange these assumptions for a linguistic monism that presumes the ability of words to posit what is purportedly ‘out there’.

Interpreting change in thought by privileging an epistemology of position can only be an obstacle to a study of the contemporary humanities that sets out to produce a precise
answer to the question how naturalisms ripple linguisticist surfaces (and that asks whether the humanities have ever been unambiguously such). Notwithstanding the seemingly positional confirmation of the existence of a current naturalist wave by the use of labels for theoretical trending, the question is how the wave makes linguisticist surfaces as well as new materialism, neo-vitalism and ecosophy possible. What needs attention is how such a study is not another Whig history – starting from the present and creating anachronistic readings of the past – and we should also ask ourselves what we might miss when we focus on emergent events, on virtualities that are not delineable instead of on actualized positions that seem fully masterable. When Samantha Frost formulates her proposal to think ecologically in the face of new feminist materialist insights that require the horizontalization of the subject, object and environment of study, she references the latter point. Frost alludes to Haraway’s ‘modest witness’ from 1997 when she states:

... what is at stake in thinking in terms of complexity, interdependence, and ecology broadly construed is epistemological and political humility in the face of the organic and inorganic world: an acknowledgment of the impossibility of full and definite knowledge and a corollary surrender of the teleological assumption that we might possibly, at some future point, achieve full mastery over ourselves and the world around us. (Frost, 2011: 79)

This ‘impossibility of complete and predictive knowledge of complex causal processes’, Frost writes, should ‘not [be] indexed to the limits of perception or to the development of technology but rather [as] intrinsic to the complexity of objects or processes themselves’ (2011: 79). Albeit that I agree with the definitive loss of the suggestion of full mastery and progressive knowledge and sympathize with the point raised about not indexing such presumed loss of perceptive impairment or technological promise (which would continue progressive chronology), I worry that Frost’s stance, in spite of its good intentions, epistemologizes the issue once more and does not take into account the full force of the anti-teleology it wishes to express. This full force can account for the defeat of Whig history, since both teleology and Whig history are predicated on differentiating the there-then from the here-now, in contrast to Mullarkey’s ontological monism and Henri Bergson’s time as ‘duration’ (Bergson, 2004[1896]). The latter embraces the possibility, we could say, that neither past nor present is ever mute or exhausted.

As an answer to Frost, let me pick up a thread from the above quote of Kirby, who claimed that the study of an ‘open system’ allows for a ‘positive science’ thus undoing Frost’s impossibility thesis. Kirby continues by quoting directly from Derrida:

... the concept of text or of context which guides me embraces and does not exclude the world, reality, history ... [T]he text is not the book, it is not confined in a volume itself confined to the library. It does not suspend reference. ... Différence is reference and vice versa. (Derrida, 1988: 137 in Kirby, 2011: viii)

To think ecologically can be transposed along these lines and this transposition is not only to be found in Derrida, but also in the work of another unusual suspect, namely Ferdinand de Saussure, as Kirby’s Telling Flesh has clearly demonstrated. Kirby (1997: 24) claimed there that ‘[i]f the problematic identity of the sign cannot be measured and
explained by reference to the stable and solid substance of an anterior reality, then the enigma of the sign can be generalized to include that reality’. So whereas Frost warns that embracing complexity confronts us with an impossibility, Kirby affirms that this complexity is always already embraced. Frost’s epistemologizing gesture consists of placing the subject outside the joint as the humble knower continues to observe the world, whereas Kirby (2011: 21) confirms ‘one phenomenon ... (which includes us)’. Humility is definitely needed here, but this humility does not pertain to primordially upholding a limit, but rather to exchanging fantasies of mastery with realities of ‘situated entanglement’ (Haraway, 1997; Barad, 2007). Situated knowledges have always been about the privilege of partial perspective and Kirby’s take on the open system proposes that the anterior reality is not stable and solid, but rather has ‘mutation/writing’ as ‘only constant’ (Kirby, 2011: ix). The positive, precise knowledges thus engendered transverse the Two Cultures and shake up linear spatial and temporal coordinates:

the identity and relational purchase of Nature, Culture, and their corollaries, substance and interpretation, are all alive to the same initial conditions that inform the clairvoyance of cellular communication and lightning strokes [for example]. In other words, these seemingly separate entities are the différent expressions of a unified field, a ‘general text’. ... as the integrity of difference is unhinged from, and yet opened through, the logic of opposition, the difference between the humanities, the social sciences, and even the sciences in regard to their respective objects of inquiry is no longer straightforward and easily defined. (Kirby, 2011: 13)

Here we encounter a positive, unified naturalism, because now mutation/writing, ‘the strange condensations that confuse and collapse difference into the mirror-maze of an “always/already”[,] might better be described as the facts of Nature’ (Kirby, 2011: 93).

We are obliged to conclude that ‘naturalist humanities’ is not an oxymoron but rather the condition of possibility of any scholarly project. But the important preliminary insight is also that this understanding of the humanities has an effect on how we study them. After all, history and philosophy of the arts and human sciences are themselves humanities subjects and therefore is the historian or philosopher not to be placed outside his or her studied materials, whether of the past or the present. In order to further develop this intricacy, I would like to refer to the work of the French historian of science Hélène Metzger (1886–1944), but not before I have discussed the context in which she herself worked.

**Metzger among logical positivists and chronological empiricists**

Metzger, who never became a professor or even got a lectureship, was a prolific writer and an active participant in the inter-war community of historians of science in France. Next to publishing book-length histories of science, Metzger gave several lectures to members of the community and published a great many review pieces on the work of colleagues. Philosophical reflection featured prominently in these talks and reviews that were, by implication, quite unconventional. However, by zooming in on the conceptual work of Metzger so as the better to understand non-reductive Continental naturalism in the contemporary humanities, I do not intend to approach this part of Metzger’s oeuvre
as a historical curiosity (Chimisso, 2001: 238; Moro Abadía, 2008: 197). Metzger herself was fiercely against picturesque histories and she was quite explicit about the importance of philosophical method in the history of science (Metzger, 1987[1937]). Apart from that, making Metzger into a rarity would repeat the processes of perpetual gendering that her career fell prey to (Chimisso and Freudenthal, 2003). However, focusing on her philosophical work produces a take on Metzger that is itself slightly unconventional. While Cristina Chimisso (2001) has extensively researched the past French debates about the history of science (should we write ‘total histories’, thus looking at the extra-academic too, or should we write ‘histories of mentalities’, thus trying to enter the mindset of the scientists of the past?) and ultimately stresses Metzger’s ambiguous contribution to both, I lift her out of this discussion about methodology and place her in a more conceptual realm. Doing this allows me to alter slightly the available interpretation of Metzger’s ‘mental a priori’, a concept that has anyway proven to be open to multiple interpretations depending on one’s partial perspective (cf. Chimisso, 2001: 238). Just as Chimisso stresses that ‘[Metzger] employed the rather vague expression “fundamental tendencies” perhaps because she wanted to include under the heading “mental a priori” also non-rational and emotional predispositions which impact on the way people reason’ (ibid.: 214), I will indeed come to emphasize the latter based on my discussion of Metzger’s shorter texts.

The way in which Metzger responded both to the logical positivism developed 1,000+ kilometres away from Paris and to her colleagues in the history of science that worked nearby can demonstrate why and how philosophy was so important for her. Since the Centre de Synthèse, for whose Histories of Science Unit Metzger served as a secretary, was ‘to promote historical knowledge along the lines of a rather positivistic conception of history’ (Chimisso, 2001: 212), Metzger can be said to have been an ‘outsider within’ that context; as much as she argued against the rise of the Wiener Kreis in epistemology, she argued against the state of the art in the historical profession. Metzger was unhappy with what we now call the Whig-historical take on mentalities, prominently put forward by her uncle, the historian of philosophy Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and popular among her French colleagues.

If we were to start with Metzger’s take on the Wiener Kreis, whose viewpoints had suddenly come to dominate the 1935 Congrès international de philosophie scientifique held in Paris, we immediately encounter the courage with which Metzger approached colleagues and their (implicit) epistemologies. Metzger’s key question about the ‘absolute positivism’ or ‘complete empiricism’ of the Wiener Kreis was about its claim to newness (Metzger, 1987[1935]: 166). Ascribing ‘an exuberance and a juvenile aggression’ to the style of the logical positivists (Metzger, 1987[1936]: 55), Metzger confirms that, on a conceptual level,

... what is worrying is that the members of the Vienna School, for the first time, believe that their Viennese insights are philosophical commonplaces. Also worrying is that the members of the Vienna School who are fighting the a priori with all their might, nevertheless keep one in place at the basis of their work; it is the systematic ignorance, first spontaneously, then required, of the original philosophical works, of the history of philosophy and the history of science. This a priori and naïve ignorance make it very difficult to come to a fair judgment. (Metzger, 1987[1935]: 166)
The important conceptual aspect of this quotation is the non-exhaustive opposition that is claimed to exist between the Kantian synthetic a priori, fought by the members of the Wiener Kreis (Geiger, 1992; Carnap, 1995[1974(1966)]), and the a priori of the latter, based on their continuing separation of thought from thinker as per which thought becomes a thing that is to be treated logically (Metzger, 1987[1935]: 167) and their consequential, yet unacknowledged, reaffirmation of what we now call a disembodied Subject.

Historian of science and Jewish thought Gad Freudenthal (1990) has rightfully linked Metzger’s manner of reasoning employed vis-à-vis logical positivism to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer (2004[1989]: 277) explicitly stated that the Enlightenment attempt at undoing prejudice from research installs itself a prejudice, stemming mainly from his insight that ‘[t]o be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete’ (ibid.: 301; original emphases). In other words, the so-called Subject is never fully known to itself and should therefore not be presupposed, which is indeed reconcilable with Metzger’s affirmation that, while constantly searching for a deepened understanding of the past, the historian tries to

\[\ldots\] penetrate with greater certainty and more active sympathy the creative thinking of the past in which he infuses new life, that he revives for a moment. Moreover, there is a personal, subjective factor \ldots which is impossible to eliminate completely; it is better to admit it honestly than to deny it \textit{a priori}. Historians, like all philosophers, like all scientists and like all humans have innate tendencies, individual, but imperceptible ways of thinking that are themselves not yet opinions or even systems of thought, but that can and do engender such opinions and systems. (Metzger, 1987[1933]: 11)\(^6\)

Unwilling to separate thought from thinker and thus considering the thinker along embodied lines, the historian, according to Metzger, ‘tries to find or recreate, for a moment in itself, the forces underlying the works that are the object of his meditation’ (Metzger, 1987[1933]: 11). Not only does this install an a priori completely different from Kant and the Wiener Kreis, but also we are looking at an ontologically monist appreciation of what scholars, including historians of science, do. This a priori manifests itself ‘in the procedures of the advancement of thinking itself’ (Metzger, 1987[1936]: 49).

In line with her affirmation of the embodied subject that is never selfsame, Metzger embraced the active role of what she labelled ‘the \textit{a priori} of expansive thought’ in an attempt to shift qualitatively the equally naive historicism of the school of the mentalities that she found herself surrounded with both in the history of science (Lévy-Bruhl and his followers) and in history in general (think of the Annales School that had also just come up). Metzger did not easily conform to the study of the mentality of an era, a programme that came with the assertion of a \textit{primitive} mentality. Metzger simply claimed about the latter that such illogical, spontaneous thought is still at work and produces the most wonderful (scholarly) discoveries (Chimisso, 2000: 50).\(^7\) Metzger

\[\ldots\] call[ed] \textit{expansive} thinking that which rushes noisily and simultaneously in all directions where it can cut a path, which will constantly and irregularly go ahead without taking a moment to contemplate with a glance the terrain covered, and without attempting to build a doctrinal monument! (Metzger, 1987[1936]: 47; original emphasis)
In conjunction with her rejection of the primitive mentality, Metzger also refused the sudden leap from non-reflective, expansive thought to reflective thought that she connects to the figure of René Descartes. Making fun of his schismic argument about the fact that ‘mentally speaking, we pass from the state of child to the state of adult’ (1987[1936]: 51–2), Metzger only wanted to go as far as confirming that there is rather continuity and back-and-forth movement between the two ways of thinking. This organic unity is further strengthened when Metzger compares ‘human intelligence [with] the eye of certain deep water fishes, which is at the same time organ of vision and source of light, if it prevents its own clarity it will quickly become blind’ (ibid.: 56). Albeit that onto-epistemology does not sit comfortably with analogy, this analogy points back at the fact that thought and thinker are one and the same.

**Onto-epistemology in the contemporary humanities**

Before we start using Metzger’s concepts of ‘active sympathy’, ‘individual, but imperceptible ways of thinking’ and ‘the a priori of expansive thought’ or ‘expansive thinking’ in order to come to an understanding of the rise of non-reductive Continental naturalism in the contemporary humanities, we should take into account an important side remark, applicable to the foregoing, made by Jens Høyrup in *Human Sciences: Reappraising the Humanities through History and Philosophy* from 2000. As part of his discussion of Jürgen Habermas’s distinction between the natural sciences as applied and technical, the humanities as interpretative and historicist, and social theory as critical and utopian, Høyrup claims:

> The main source of many of the problems with Habermas’s scheme is that he builds his understanding of the single scientific domains on the interpretations of other philosophers (often normative interpretations, stating what ought to be the methods and aim of the sciences), and not giving original investigations. (Høyrup, 2000: 189)

It is not my intention to dive into Høyrup’s discussion with Habermas as the consequential set of diffractive readings would require another article, but his reminder transverses this obstacle as it leads us back to previous steps in my argumentation. If ‘original investigations’ are to be embraced in the history and philosophy of the arts and the human sciences, then I should also deal with the work of, for instance, Kirby as it is of naturalism instead of solely zooming in on that part of her work that is on Derrida’s philosophical reworking of the positivism–historicism debate. After all, it is by performing the specific Continental naturalism that Kirby, like Metzger’s lantern fish, generates its objects/phenomena, claims and norms. Whereas this immediately tempers our fear of falling into Høyrup’s trap, since the genealogical activity between Kirby and Derrida is part of the performance and taking Derrida for ‘Theory’ instantiates a spatiality that is as linear as ‘chronological empiricism’ (Metzger, 1987[1937]: 58), let us look at the positive knowledge that Kirby brings forth by, we assume, thinking expansively.

Duke University Press advertises *Quantum Anthropologies* as a book of science studies, feminist theory and literary theory (see the back cover). ‘Quantum’ invokes physics and if ‘anthropologies’ are quantum physical, then the leaping between scholarly fields...
can be assumed to cut across the Two Cultures. Anthropologies might as well be of the natural sciences as they are of the human sciences and even the many pluralities here in use are not to be mistaken for a straightforwardly additive logic. Indeed, nowhere in *Quantum Anthropologies* do we find an outside phenomenon that is being analysed in a disembodied manner and, in that sense, the book is true to Metzger’s active sympathy. The embodied stance itself, however, is being rewritten by Kirby as it is not a ‘new’ clear-cut origin of scholarly work. Kirby works, counter-intuitively maybe, along the lines of the Derridean ‘there is no outside of text’. Kirby writes that ‘if “there is no outside of text”, as Derrida suggests, then it is in “the nature of Nature” to write, to read and to model’ (Kirby, 2006: 84). In other words, Derrida’s ‘there is no outside of language’ should be rewritten as: ‘there is no outside of Nature’ (Kirby, 2011: 83): hence, Kirby’s new naturalism, on the back cover called a ‘new feminist materialism’ by Barad.

In *Quantum Anthropologies* everything happens in the book, but this does not imply that readers end up observing a bounded, solipsistic game. Reading Kirby does not mean that one ends up in this particular scholar’s head, as is often assumed when the humanities are debunked for being subjectivist. With the affirmation that there is no fixed or floating object of research (for instance, a particular set of works of art) comes the affirmation that there is not a pinpoint-able subject either (as in Subject or in an individualist manner). The analysis does not begin with an ‘I’ that objectifies something as Other nor does it end with the ‘I’ that is put up on the basis of the triumphant mastering of mute(d) materials. In the case of both object and subject the delineation is constantly suspended; in other words, we never encounter full fixity. Indeed, Metzger’s imperceptible ways of thinking are very helpful in this context.

Let me provide an example of the possibility to engender positive knowledge in a newly naturalist way. In the chapter ‘Just Figures? Forensic Clairvoyance, Mathematics, and the Language Question’ we encounter Kirby unintentionally watching the Learning Channel and being grabbed by a programme on forensic science. She is fascinated by the fact that the clue to identifying a skull might not be on or of the skull in the literal sense: ‘things with no apparent connection to the material at hand were somehow integral to its provenance’ (Kirby, 2011: 23). The discussion of the forensic scientist calling in the help of a forensic artist then has to wait, because Kirby ‘want[s] to make a brief detour to explain the techniques involved in such facial reconstruction’ (ibid.: 23). Before we, readers, know it, we are also swept away, because did we expect such journeying? And do our expectations (of humanities scholarship) matter? Kirby continues the trip through Husserl/Derrida and to a geology, literally a science of the earth:

The figure of the face would appear to incorporate a connective tissue wherein flesh and bone resonate with numbers and names; figures, figurations, *la figure*. There is surely something decidedly uncanny about this infrastructural conversation, or is it a conversion, for the particular face whose identifying coherence has yet to be discovered is mirrored in other faces that reference its particular coordinating contours. (Kirby, 2011: 40)

Let me stress that in this conclusion, we do not encounter a unit of scholarly knowledge about a unit of the outside world (the object) written by a goal-oriented scholarly Subject/subject. Following Kirby’s active sympathy with the TV show and the featured
forensic scientists and, transitively again, with the skull, we find ourselves as it were before a conclusive statement about a reality and, therefore, it is in reality that we find ourselves. This is the reality of, first, the object of research that remains unknown (there is no full mastery over, quite literally, ‘anonym’) or undelineated (anonym keeps producing connections); second, the subject who remains on the move (neither Subject nor subjective) because Kirby is spontaneously led elsewhere as she constantly transverses disciplines and the internalism–externalism divide; and, third, knowledge that does not turn out to be the solution of the question of anonym or a methodological blueprint but rather ‘just’ onto-epistemological considerations. These considerations (themselves ‘figures’) are careful, open-ended and affirmatively inconclusive.

Albeit that Quantum Anthropologies is an extraordinary piece of humanities scholarship, it does not stand on its own. The book is clearly part of the rise of new materialism (studying anonym is about agential matter and its meaning [Barad]), neovitalism (we discuss the life of organic and inorganic matter and of mathematics and signification [Grosz and Colebrook]) and eco(philosophy) (our approach is an approaching of earth [Tim Ingold]). These new trends in the humanities do not allow themselves to be understood in positivist and/or historicist terms. All these trends work with the conditions of possibility of scholarship and do not assume to be able to transcend anything. As said, Colebrook has claimed that we should ask how life itself is involved in processes of signification, since to assume to know what signification is, that is, to ascribe certain parameters to signification in the study of human affairs, prevents one from studying what is usually considered to be what makes us human: language and meaning-giving. Kirby has correspondingly put mathematics on a par with signification and demonstrates in her work how they are both and simultaneously the language of nature. She does not study what makes us human (or: Human), but zooms in on ‘the making of’ in and of itself. This she calls ‘originary humanicity’ (Kirby, 2011: 20).

A poignant example of studying what makes us human can be found in the work of aforementioned Høyrup. Working with a canonical interpretation of the hermeneutic circle, Høyrup suggests that ‘[b]oth in the Schleiermacher/Dilthey and in the Heidegger/Gadamer variant, we as observers undergo the change, not the dialogue partner, which is a fixed text’ (Høyrup, 2000: 221; original emphasis). This seems to be a critical remark that opens up for a more inclusive notion of the subject of scholarly knowledge (the humanist undergoing change by undertaking a study), but both Kirby and Metzger would invite us to think twice. How are texts like poems, sculptures and skulls fixed? How are the forces that underlie texts ever mute? The German framework that tries to emancipate the human sciences leaves intact the tree of academic knowledge as well as the subject–object hierarchy. Instead, the quest after the system that we use in our work as one that comes from the material, vital, earthly a priori leads us back to the red thread of the subject matter of this article: non-reductive Continental naturalism as a dislocation of positivism and historicism alike. Both numbers (supposedly the vehicle of positive knowledge as in ‘empirical data’ or ‘facts’) and language (presumably at work in historicist accounts alone) stir the question: ‘What life is such that it yields signification?’ So, are the numbers of positivism and the language of historicism any different? They both run to, through and from the living matter of the not-so-anonymous skull, for example.
Concluding discussion: The ‘creative a priori’

We have seen that the 1930s context of Metzger existed, first of all, in the anti-Kantian members of the Wiener Kreis that propagated the impossibility of a synthetic \textit{a priori} and attempted to restrict knowledge theory to the analytic \textit{a priori} (knowledge based in logical reasoning) and the synthetic \textit{a posteriori} (experience-based knowledge). Metzger made explicit how this framework, established through oppositional argumentation, was far from new and did nothing but reintroduce the disembodied knower, historian and philosopher. Second, the historicist alternative was uncovered as being infused with positivism. Metzger claimed that the chronological empiricism that was the foundation of the work of her French colleagues was not verifiable, because the primitive mentality that modern scientists had supposedly overcome was, according to Metzger, still around us and very productive in fact. She refuted the historian’s claim to disembodiment and made spontaneous thought into an important building block for thinking about thinking as well as making discoveries. What Metzger proposed is a thoroughly reworked a priori: the a priori of expansive thought. I propose to condense this label and to call her a priori a ‘creative’ one. This creative a priori is both a rethinking of the \textit{a priori} discussion then and now and a tool with which the a priori of any a priori can be studied. The concept of the creative \textit{a priori} is to capture and keep alive the complex onto-epistemological moves made in Metzger’s least-known work. ‘Creative a priori’ is shorthand for active sympathy, individual but imperceptible ways of thinking and expansive thought.

The a priori has for long been suffocating in defining epistemological divides such as rationalism/idealism vs empiricism/realism. The greatest thinkers of the western philosophical canon have been involved with the question of the a priori: Hume and Kant, for that matter, and later Quine, whose legacy still dominates analytic philosophy in particular. Most of these thinkers have dealt with a priori knowledge and with the context of justification. If we look at one of the first studies of naturalization as the prohibition to enter, precisely, the realm of knowledge and its justification, we find that Genevieve Lloyd (1993[1984]) emphasizes the Cartesianism of all of these positions and their impossibility to answer to the questions provoked by the ‘sexless soul’ and its own embodiment as well as its impact on embodied Others. Lloyd asks ‘[w]hat must be the relationship between minds and bodies for it to be possible for the symbolic content of \textit{man} and \textit{woman} to feed into the formation of our sense of ourselves as male or female?’ (ibid.: xii; original emphases) so as to affirm that the Spinozist alternative to Cartesianism qualitatively shifts our understanding of what it means to think, giving the body priority over the mind and extending to the context of discovery. Metzger’s creative a priori should be positioned in this tradition as she made the forceful claim to

\ldots not speak about the quarrel about innate ideas, not about the opposition of rationalism and empiricism, not about the constantly recurring dispute about idealism and realism, not about the Kantian critique, not about the evolutionary hypotheses, not about causality, time, space, \ldots we do not talk about the many theories of scientific knowledge. (Metzger, 1987[1936]: 42)

Just like Metzger’s proposition to \textit{study} instead of presuppose the positions mentioned in the citation, Lloyd comes to the conclusion that ‘Descartes’s alignment between the
Reason–non-Reason and mind–body distinctions brought with it the notion of a distinctive kind of rational thought as a *highly restricted* activity (Lloyd, 1993[1984]: 46; emphasis added). When presuppositions about rationality are made, we will never reach the *expansive thought* that Metzger considers key to scholarly activity in the past and present. So whereas Descartes wished ‘to remove all obstacles to the natural operations of the mind’ (Lloyd, 1993[1984]: 44), ‘Spinoza, reacting against the passivity or Descartes’s version of Reason, . . . made Reason an active, emotional force’ (ibid.: 51), just like Metzger proposed as basis for histories of science and just like the naturalist humanities are doing daily.

**Notes**

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1. Historicism is used here in a way that embraces historicism per se, interpretivism, contextualism and other approaches that are considered to be vulnerable for relativism. When I refer to positivism, its totalizing epistemological ideal should be kept in mind, that is, it should be remembered that its goal is to produce universal truths that stem from allegedly disembodied researchers.

2. Reworkings of Descartes (e.g. the forthcoming work of Richard Serjeantson) and Kant (e.g. Shaviro, 2009) are of course part of the game.

3. In the words of Haraway:

   Actors come in many and wonderful forms. Accounts of a ‘real’ world do not, then, depend on a logic of ‘discovery’ but on a power-charged social relation of ‘conversation’. The world neither speaks itself nor disappears in favor of a master decoder. . . . [T]he world encountered in knowledge projects is an active entity. Insofar as a scientific account has been able to engage this dimension of the world as object of knowledge, faithful knowledge can be imagined and can make claims on us. But no particular doctrine of representation or decoding or discovery guarantees anything. (Haraway, 1988: 593)

4. All translations of Metzger are mine.

5. Patricia Hill Collins developed this concept in the 1990s for black women in North-American academia.

6. Let me state here explicitly, first of all, that Metzger (1987[1936]: 42) questions the innate in a later piece. Second, Metzger’s a priori, one that may seem far off to many, is, to the contrary,
perfectly aligned with discussions on the a priori. The three conceptions of the a priori (‘something might be a priori in relation to a given inquiry or investigation by being known or assumed prior to that inquiry’; ‘something might be biologically a priori through being innate or the result of innately determined development’; and ‘something might be justified without appeal to experiential evidence’ [Harman, 2003: 24–5]) are all dealt with when Metzger in ‘L’ a priori dans la doctrine scientifique et l’histoire des sciences’ [The a priori in scientific doctrine and the history of sciences] discusses canonical (linked with colleague André Lalande) and minor trends with respect to the a priori, differentiates between ‘l’a priori en acte’ and ‘l’a priori en puissance’, and claims that the a priori is multiplicitous, that is, it does not coincide with itself.

7. It is along the same lines that Metzger is critical about the commonplace that ‘All men are equal’, of which she confirms that it presupposes a negative judgement (Metzger, 1987[1936]: 36).

8. This is what Høyrup claims:

... Habermas’s eclectic approach causes him to miss the shared cognitive interest of the natural sciences and the humanities: the aspiration for world order and for comprehensive understanding of our total condition within the cosmos. This cognitive interest (which has something in common both with the practical and the emancipatory interests and with the ‘theoretical’ interest of Greek philosophy) could be labeled ‘ordering curiosity’ or ‘critical world order construction’. (Høyrup, 2000: 189-90; original emphasis)

It is apparent that such curiosity is not affirmed here for its non-linearity, a non-linearity that is experienced from singular, embodied and embedded locations. This article attempts to work from such locations.

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