

## Symposium: John Lardas Modern's *Neuromatic: Or, A Particular History of Religion and the Brain*

# Thinking about John Thinking about Cognitive Scientists Thinking about Religion

### NEUROMATIC: OR, A PARTICULAR HISTORY OF RELIGION AND THE BRAIN

By John Lardas Modern.  
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I have so many questions for John about his book, I can't possibly get to all of them in this space. Presently, I am going to try to be as critical as possible and play a bit of devil's advocate. I focus on the part of the book I know quite intimately, chapter one, which is partly an ethnography of the RCC and MindLab in Aarhus, where I also spent quite a bit of time, about 5 years from 2007 to 2012.

But before I get there, I must say part of the trouble I have with the book is a kind of whispering of the actual critique. For me, it's like a ghost or a whale I am trying to find but never quite reaching. I know certain things are good, and John likes them.<sup>1</sup> And certain things are bad, John doesn't like them. This doesn't seem to have a lot to do with methods or theories for John but more to do with style, the vibes a particular researcher gives off, or perhaps we could call them Modernian punk virtues?

In no particular order, and not exhaustively, a few of them are: that it is good if things are out of control, uncertain,

<sup>1</sup>In John's response at the symposium he made it clear that some of the things I attributed to him as good or bad were off the mark.

non-intelligible, and incalculable. The Neuromatic episteme is bad, I think, for John, partly because scientists produce a world where such things are good. The scientists are Ahab, obsessively trying to chart the white whale, and John is Ishmael, somewhere in the ship, trying to tell a story about what is going on.

There are also Modernian sins: arrogance, calculation, clarity, precision, normalizing, and naturalizing.

In John's story, there is something very wrong with the situation we are in right now. The sky is falling. Something is ominous and scary about the Neuromatic moment, a moment that partly entails the redescription of science in terms of neurological networks and information theory where everything must be fungible, computable, and quantifiable—a kind of machine logic guiding all intertexts. A systematized and mathematized human nature where the brain is a machine. Later sciences influenced by cybernetics, which he calls second-order, even if they drop the machine metaphor, are still doomed, according to John. They are swallowed up by the organic totality of the modern episteme, and there is nowhere to hide.

John does not think he can exactly escape from this particular cage or boat, as it were, but there are inklings of resistance. "Fugitive history," as he calls it, or "immanent criticism" in Adorno's words, is the answer. John acknowledges genealogy is indeed a cybernetic method. Perhaps this is where the cybernetic tendencies in the book come from. So instead of the brain taking over as the dominant universal metaphor, now "modernity" or "secularism" takes over. Every moment, every example is able to be controlled, tamed, and explained by historicizing it as part of the moment we are in. There are no counter-examples or falsifications, not even the possibility of them. A totalizing holism.

But there is "intervention."

John is fighting someone, or some thing.

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Since John is doing cybernetics, and we are all examples of the Neuromatic moment, presumably, there must be different versions of these things, different politics, ethics, and virtues within these. Just calling something cybernetic isn't enough. Why are some things virtuous and other things not?

I will now turn briefly to the CSR part.

John has compiled the most beautiful and indeed meticulous genealogy of the conditions that allow CSR to constitute knowledge. He also shows the absurd humanity involved in that process.

I was, and guess I still am, if you look on their website, a participant in the RCC in Aarhus. So I was part of the fictional campus novel that I think is underlying the chapter and John's fieldwork. A bunch of insane people trying to study religion.

By the time John got there, I think I was *persona non grata*, or perhaps they just thought I was a "moron with a normal EEG" (80). A few years before, at a big conference in Toronto, I tried to argue seriously, from a scientific perspective, that the heart literally was the mind, not the brain. A lot of people at RCC stopped talking to me after that (though some talked to me more).

Anyway, bear with me because I think this egocentric digression connects to some broader points. I was making that argument as a response to what I saw (and John sees) as a strong Protestant inflection in CSR. I was reacting to the fact that CSR wasn't, so to speak, "secular" at all; it was full of actively "religious" people trying to justify and apologize and naturalize religion. The Aarhus guys mostly didn't like that but swallowed it grudgingly. As good Scandinavians, Protestantism was perfectly normal, made sense.

I was trying to ask, what about Judaism? What would cognition look like from a "Judaic" perspective? There are, of course, Protestant leanings in some forms of Judaism, but I was looking at other sources.

What would cognition look like from countless other metaphysical perspectives we have around us?

Similarly, rhetorically John argues for an alternative. But not clearly (because clarity and precision are bad?). I think John believes that his formalism, one that may replicate the cybernetic proclivities under his scrutiny, has a noble purpose. He models the system "in order to intervene, deliberately and definitively" (66). Am I right in thinking the type of intervention John has in mind would be a kind of work of art, beautiful, meticulous, that is at the same time a kind of trolling of the system?

This project he envisions of recognizing "discourse as systematic" might be a precondition indeed "for moving across and perhaps even beyond it" (66).

I would like to know *to where?* And *why* do we want to get there?

I am surprised and struck by John saying he is "not particularly interested in the creative, radically open, disunified,

groovy, and/or liberatory dimensions" of heterodox projects within the mind sciences that also seek to be reflexive and provide alternatives. Presumably, this is because he wants to stay close to the jib of historical genealogy. For, indeed, he "wants to resist reading the abstract freedoms promised by cybernetics as anything more than that ... anything more than wishful thinking" (54).

This seems unfair to me, since John accepts that he is just as much engulfed in the Neuromatic episteme as anyone else; that is, he does not have the magical ability to transcend it any more than anyone else. Isn't there a better strategy to look for here? Aren't those projects just as much a resistance or intervention as his own? I mean specifically ones that see something wrong with the current scientific paradigm and seek disunified and groovy ways to resist?

Presumably, since John thinks the Neuromatic moment is something we can intervene against and possibly to move beyond, it turns out he does have something of a "liberatory" project in mind. Rhetorically, he poses *his* liberatory project as better, for example, than critical voices within disciplines of the mind sciences. But why is it better, since he is using the same machines? Machines that occlude difference, make everything flat and whole, much in the way John dismisses the differences within the history he articulates; any difference in the discourse must be ignored as not interesting or pointillist because it doesn't conform to the organic totality of an episteme. It is a form of flattening in order to fit a narrative and complicity in making of secular age becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. So the basic question there is: Why is John's Power/Knowledge better? What are the criteria?

One of his problems seems to be with the concept of freedom. Is there a way to recover an idea of freedom that John is more comfortable with? What is the metaphysics behind *that* concept? Why is it better? Presumably, John believes in some sense of freedom, otherwise, the idea of an intervention would be paradoxical. Is it? Shouldn't artistic punks like freedom, or have they grown cynical?

I see two poles of reticence in the book. The first is a reticence to define the human. The second is a reticence to naturalize anything.

John's book is on the Foucault side of things. He takes aim at cybernetics. This is basically the key to understanding our present age. As he says, he is not interested in a few black sheep individuals who go against the cybernetic current. This is the proper genealogical move, but of course it leaves something out because the position has to resist seeing individual intentions as anything more than wishful thinking in order for his project to make sense.

In this model, nature is put under quarantine, a threshold one dare never cross. I think, in contrast, that naturalizing the human might be bad, but not naturalizing it is worse. John doesn't give us any argument as to why naturalizing

(information) is bad. The worry we share is that there will be no human left once this overarching naturalism is realized. This line between human nature and nature I think, is similar to the line between life and nonlife. Both have normative implications. The line between them is not scientific but rather closer to what Foucault called an “epistemological indicator” (*indicateur épistémologique*; see Chomsky and Foucault 2015, 6, 7). The lines themselves are outside of science.

One of the key questions of our present age concerns the human relation to information. John criticizes the “founding assumption” of cybernetics “that information is built into nature and guarantees correspondences across all domains” (397). So the critique of information is part and parcel of the critique of human nature. But I think a more explicit critique of this version of information can be presented.

For example, another critique of the concept of information in cognitive science comes from Jerome Bruner, a giant in the field of cultural psychology in the last generation, which he presented in his Jerusalem-Harvard lectures at the Hebrew University. Bruner begins by bemoaning where the “cognitive revolution” went wrong. He basically thinks it went wrong because it ignored meaning in favor of information processing.

So both he and John seem to have a problem with this trend. But unlike John, Bruner actually tells us why, within his own narrative about the primacy of meaning in narratives. Bruner recognizes that in order to account for something like a human level of meaning, a story has to be told about how it develops in young children and the history of our species. There has to be something like proto-linguistic meaning. He lays that out in his third lecture and chapter called “entry into meaning.” He argues that children enter into meaning by learning how to tell stories. Meaning only makes sense in a particular cultural context. Children gradually work their way into that context by grasping first in a prelinguistic manner. This is a matter of learning more than biology, but biology has a constraining role to play for Bruner.

For Bruner, certain mental forms have to be in place (or received) for something like the human level of meaning to emerge. These he lays out in the second chapter, “Folk Psychology as an Instrument of Culture.” It requires, first, a means for emphasizing human action or “agentivity”—action directed toward goals controlled by agents. It requires, secondly, that a sequential order be established and maintained—that events and states be “linearized” in a standard way. Narrative, thirdly, also requires a sensitivity to what is canonical and what violates canonicity in human interaction. Finally, narrative requires something approximating a narrator’s perspective: it cannot, in the jargon of narratology, be “voiceless.” It is a “push” to construct narrative that determines the order of priority in which grammatical forms are mastered by the young child.

My point in bringing this up is that any critique worth its salt of the concept of information is going to have to engage the

discourse, to be immanent in the discourse. I am not sure the genealogical approach can do that. It tends to stand outside, to transcend. Now John is fully aware of this, and accepts that both he and Foucault are part of the epistemes in which they do genealogy. To be fair, he paradoxically rejects the idea that he transcends the discourse he is researching, saying in a section called “poetics” that he offers “a view from the belly of this particular Leviathan” (64). But I have my doubts this ambivalent stance can work. If this is a global critique of all science and all scholarship at a particular time, it seems to lead to a kind of circularity. If all the concepts in the episteme are bad, then those include the concepts used by the genealogist. If only some are bad, I, personally, need some discussion of why some are better than others.

Thus aside from circularity, there is also the problem of difference. What I mean is there is a kind of flattening over of difference in the discourse for the sake of the genealogical instrument. In that sense, it ignores the immanent contextual meanings in the discourse of science.

Now Bruner does not think linguistic forms of robust meaning-making necessarily “grow out of” the prelinguistic practices. In fact, he thinks it impossible “in principle to establish any formal continuity between an earlier ‘preverbal’ and a later functionally ‘equivalent’ linguistic form.” He gives the example of comparing someone saying, “Can I have the apple?” to the “outstretched manual request gesture that predates it” (Bruner 1990, 76).

I am interested in this gap that Bruner and others are pointing to – the continuity and discontinuity between these two types of practices, one before meaning, the other after meaning. There is a phylogenetic and ontogenetic story to tell here. Biology will have a role to play. It must.

The concept of information surely does not capture the sense of meaning Bruner is trying to develop here, which requires a cultural context, reception, interaction, development, situations, folk psychology, and narrative to emerge. Information processing, as he says, doesn’t work in its traditional sense: “Information is indifferent with respect to meaning. In computational terms, information comprises an already precoded message in the system .... According to classic information theory, a message is informative if it reduces alternative choices. This implies a code of established possible choices” (Bruner 1990, 4–5).

With regard to meaning, the point is that there is no preestablished code. Meaning is libertarian, not neo-liberal. Information and meaning are same same but different. So Bruner’s “cognitive” stance, I argue, doesn’t usher in all those problems John discusses because a human level of meaning is preserved.

In non-human animals or even plants, however, it might make sense to talk about preexisting codes. For example, the calls of certain primates do not have the flexibility of human meaning systems. Those signs are more like indexes than

symbols in Peircian terminology. Their reception is more fixed. In that sense, the concept of information processing might make more sense. In my book, I dubbed this a difference between natural information and semantics, but other people frame it differently (Levy 2022).

So, I think John and I agree and disagree about information. We agree that it is a poor concept for making sense of human discourse and meaning-making. We agree that is a concept with a history coming out of the cognitive revolution. I think we disagree about its usefulness for explaining communication more broadly. So I think it is useful to a limited extent, and John thinks it is irredeemable.

I get the feeling John is trying to protect something about humanity at the same time that he doubts the very idea of the human as Foucault did. I think he is reticent to define the human because once that is done, it can become normative and conservative and thus lead to a loss of creativity and freedom. On the one hand, once you define something as human, you also define what is not human, and thus rationalize or legalize different treatment between human and non-human agents. This can have profoundly bad political and ethical consequences. On the other hand, maybe the human is the wrong category to be deciding the issue of, for example, rights. A better one might be the category of a person. All humans, no matter their ethnicity, level of mental or physical challenge, are persons. Many non-human animals may also fit that category.

Maybe this just sets up another bad category, however. I just think that without being upfront about metaphysics and anthropology implied in a discourse, even a discourse about discourse, we cannot even begin discussing these important questions.

These musings bring me to the next topic: anthropocentrism.

Both approaches (John's and mine), implicitly or explicitly, deal with human nature. The choice to *not* define human nature, I think, is a kind of negative theology about the human. We don't know what the human is, we only know what it is not. This approach has value because it preserves, as said, a libertarian view of the human, it makes room for possible futures

and ethics. At the same time, I think any time a scholar writes about history or even about discourse, he or she must make implicit judgments about the human.

We should be aware that Foucault's whole enterprise was meant to call this argument into question. Discourse has a kind of agency of its own. Individual authors are not important. This point comes out in the debate between Chomsky and Foucault held in Eindhoven in 1971 on the topic of human nature, where the Dutch moderator tries to press Foucault on his historical role as an individual (Chomsky and Foucault 2015, 22, 30). Foucault does not fall for the trap. He insists that he as an individual is not important. Individuals are simply "information nodes" in the discursive network.

My point in bringing this up is that both John and Foucault want to criticize the emergence of the human (or "Man") as an object of scientific inquiry. For John, this is especially problematic when the human starts to become equated with a machine (I think). This is likely a valuable ethical and political point.

However, ironically, I think that by limiting the bounds of discourse only to the absent presence of the human—for all the sources they use are texts made by humans (or is this doubted?)—their views are anthropocentric in this exclusion. If we really want to avoid seeing humans as objects, I think it makes more sense to view humans and our discourse in the whole evolutionary history of life. In other words, take a broader view, a broader scope. In this view, human beings are not that special. We are one life form among others who share planet earth.

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