Taking things seriously: the politics of new materialism

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Taking Things Seriously: The Politics of New Materialism

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Introduction

The French philosopher, anthropologist, and sociologists Bruno Latour once asked his readers to build a 'parliament of things'. In this parliament, not only humans beings, but also entities as the ozone hole, the Mosanto chemical industry, and the electorate of New Hempshire should have a seat.[1] One reason for Latour for arguing for the inclusion of non-human entities into processes of political decision-making was his belief that notions of actor and agency were not limited to human beings alone. In contrast to the concept of 'actor', he uses the word 'actant' to designate the influence non-humans have on their environment, including the lives of human beings. Moreover, Latour thinks that "action is a property of associated entities."[2] By using the word actant, Latour could take into account the way human beings and the non-human things in their environment, influence each other and collectively bring about certain effects. One famous example of such an actant is the speed bump, or 'sleeping policeman'.[3] Latour explains that the speed bump forces drivers to slow down; which makes it functionally equivalent to a normal policeman. What it means to built such a parliament is at the moment of writing unclear (Latour did not yet develop his proposal). I nevertheless agree with Kerry H. Whiteside that we should thank Latour for bringing in 'nature' into the discussion about the manner political institutions should deal with their environment.[4]

But stimulating a political discussion about the impact of policies on the environment is different from offering things 'from nature' a seat in our parliaments. What does it mean to include these things in our political institutions? Historically, political theorists considered it of great importance to distinguish society from nature, and the proposal of reintroducing nature into politics can therefore be seen as the "return to a primitive state, attributing magical qualities to inanimate objects."[5] A second worry one can have when reading Latour's work is that if we also start attributing notions of agency to nonhumans, we loose sight of what it means to be human.[6] What's left of our special status as human beings when things start acting too? Latour was not the only scholar writing about the role of things in our social-political life. In this thesis, I discuss three authors who not only regularly refer to Latour's work, but often also criticize him for, among other things, being still too human-centered. Jane Bennett, Karen Barad and Rosi Braidotti are contributors to a movement in contemporary theory called 'new materialism'.[7] Thinkers in the new materialist movement reflect upon the meaning and relevance

1 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 144.

2 Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope : Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 182.

3 Ibid., 186.

4 Kerry H. Whiteside, "A Representative Politics of Nature? Bruno Latour on Collectives and Constitutions," *Contemporary Political Theory* 12, no. 3 (2013): 185–205.

5 Bruce Braun and Sarah Whatmore, "The Stuff of Politics: An Introduction," in *Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy, and Public Life*, ed. Bruce Braun and Sarah Whatmore (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xiv. See also: Noortje Marres, *Material Participation: Technology, the Environment and Everyday Publics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 10.

6 Isabelle Stengers, "Including Nonhumans in Political Theory: Opening Pandora's Box?," in *Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy, and Public Life*, ed. Bruce Braun and Sarah Whatmore (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 4.

7 Rick Dolphijn and Iris Van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities, 2012); Rick Dolphijn and Iris Van der Tuin, "Pushing Dualism to an Extreme: On the Philosophical Impetus of a New Materialism," *Continental Philosophy Review* 44, no. 4 (2011): 383–400; Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Rebekah Sheldon, "Form / Matter / Chora: Object-Oriented Ontology and Feminist New Materialism," in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard A. Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 193–222; Jane Bennett, "Systems and Things: On Vital Materialism," in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard A. Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 223–39; Sara Ahmed, "Open Forum Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the 'New Materialism,'" *European Journal of Women's Studies* 15, no. 1 (2008): 23–39; Myra J. Hird, "Feminist Matters:

of matter. As Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost explain in the introduction to their volume on the topic, new materialists criticize the conventional Cartesian conception of matter as something inert and radically different from us human subjects.[8] Drawing from a large variety of sources, new materialists emphasize the vital, active, relational, and productive characteristics of materials. But bringing matter back to life has consequences for many hierarchies and dualisms to be found in 'modernist' thought. Exemplary are the distinctions between nature and society, and that of subject and object. Almost all conventional ways in which we make sense of ourselves and our place in the world are turned upside down, and often replaced by completely new and difficult vocabularies. This thesis evaluates the social-political relevance of new materialism by answering the following question: what is the social-political relevance of the onto-ethical claims put forward by the new materialists? Two goals motivate the writing of this thesis. To, in the first place, present the reader who is unfamiliar with the new materialist literature a relatively clear and accessible introduction to the work of three representative new materialists' authors. Secondly, propose a methodological apparatus with which one can evaluate the work of these authors without having to enter into complicated discussions about the truth-value of their work. As I explain in chapter three, the relevance of new materialists work lies more in their ability to stimulate new ways of understanding one's place in the world, and less in presenting a 'true' metaphysical theory.

Neither Latour, nor our three new materialist are the first in deconstructing implicit but dominant conceptions of agency and subjectivity in political theory. One good other example in this respect is Seyla Benhabib who criticized conceptions of subjectivity to be found in the works of Immanuel Kant, Thomas Hobbes and John Rawls. Benhabib argued that the human being as presented behind, for instance, Rawls' 'veil of ignorance', did not reflect the way actual human beings "with a concrete history, identity, and affective-emotional constitution" are.[9] In contrast to the 'generalized other', which had been isolated from its sociology-historical context, Benhabib puts forward the 'concrete other' which is characterized by being embedded in its context and body. Embeddedness and embodiment are for new materialists of major importance as well. Exemplary here is Braidotti's arguments about the different ways various types of bodies are entangled with an indefinite number of other entities which influence not only the type of subject that is being constituted then, but also the attitude one has towards oneself, and subsequently other parts of these networks. In the first part of this thesis, I dig deeper into the ontological claims made by Bennett, Barad, and Braidotti. What kind of beings, Being, or mode(s) of being do they envision, and what are the arguments for their claims? In part two, I evaluate the ethical-political claims our authors make. What kind of ethics and politics is left after their deconstructions of all modern, conventional conceptual apparatuses to be found in political theory? Is there even place for a form of politics, and if yes: what sort of notion is put forward? In our third, evaluative part, we encounter a tremendous methodological difficulty: what criteria can be used to evaluate theories that argue that, shortly stated, everything is 'in becoming', nothing is fixed, and everything is interrelated? I explain that the new materialist theories are interesting because they propose new modes of theorizing, which are also relevant for theorists working in other philosophical traditions. With help from Stephen K. White and Linda Zerilli, I show that the work of our studied authors should be understood as weak ontological attempts of changing the way we look at the world. I argue that new materialists texts are also relevant for political theorists for meta-ethical and methodological reasons because the texts show the importance of ethical attitudes and ontology for

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New Materialist Considerations of Sexual Difference," *Feminist Theory* 5, no. 2 (2004): 223–32.

8 Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 8–9.

9 Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 157.

ethical-political theory.

1. Ontologies

In this chapter I introduce the ontological pictures drawn by Bennett, Barad and Braidotti. With help of several examples, and as free of jargon as possible, I explain the key claims made by our three new materialists.

1.1 Bennett's blackout

In August 2003, something extraordinary happened in a large number of cities in the United States and Canada: about 50 million people were cut off from electricity.[10] The exact cause of the blackout is difficult to pin down: many different parts of the electricity grid connecting homes in the US and Canada were involved, which all had an influence on the way the problem emigrated to the Canadian province of Ontario. Jane Bennett, in her *Vibrant Matter*, lists a number of these parts: electricity, power plants, transmission wires, a brush fire in Ohio, several energy-trading corporations, consumers, and the so called Energy Policy Act of 1992. All these different entities, ranging from human beings, to laws, and to streams of electrons, are part of the explanation of how this blackout could have had such a major impact on so many people. For Bennett, the best way to understand this event, is not to put the blame exclusively on individual human beings or malfunctioning electronics, but to look at the way the individual parts of the electricity network were intertwined and brought about an effect, which should be seen as the emergent property of the network. To say that the effect is emergent means that it is not to be reduced to the sum of all individual parts. The effect can therefore never be fully grasped by solely studying the individual components. Moreover, Bennett explains that this effect should be seen as the result of the *agency* of this specific assemblage of corporations, electrons and human beings. Bennett, in other words, argues that all the individual parts of the network influenced, in one way or another, the route the blackout took, and most importantly, that we should understand this impact as the agency of the collection of human and non-human things. To be able to fully understand how Bennett came to this picture of the North American blackout, and explain what it exactly has to do with her attempt to deconstruct the conventional life-matter distinction and attribute life and agency to non-human things, we need to take a step back and take a look at the idea of 'thing-power', the concept of 'actant', and lastly, that of the 'assemblage'.

Bennett asks herself what the world would look like when we put things we normally conceive of as dead and ready to be used, onto our 'ethical radar screen'.[11] What would happen when we became conscious of not only the fact that we are part of large complicated webs of interacting things, but that we *are* such a network ourselves as well? Bennett explains that in a similar fashion as you are part of a larger networks of other human beings, non-human animals, and things, your body is a complicated assemblage of bacteria, viruses, minerals, and even the food you consume on a daily basis.[12] How does she come to this ontological picture? The first important concept here is that of thing-power. Thing-power is the property of non-human things which makes us, human beings, wonder about the status of the thing itself. In contrast to *objects*, *things* draw our attention and have the power to change their mode of being.[13] Here Bennett deliberately ascribes certain 'human' characteristics to non-human things to which I will come back in chapter two. One example of such a 'thing' would be the sleeping

10 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 24–28.

11 Jane Bennett, "The Force of Things: Steps Toward an Ecology of Matter," *Political Theory* 32, no. 3 (2004): 357; Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 116.

12 Bennett, "The Force of Things," 360; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, chap. 3.

13 Bennett, "The Force of Things," 354.

policeman described in the introduction. In contrast to a simple piece of concrete, that specific *object*, on that specific location and time, transforms into something else: a *thing* demanding the driver of the car to slow down. One other example would be a malfunctioning projector. When giving a PowerPoint presentation you are usually not conscious of the projector facilitating your presentation. But the moment the light the projector emits starts flickering, the device begins to make strange noises and after a couple of seconds stops functioning altogether, the projector becomes what Latour would call a 'matter of concern', demanding your attention.[14] For Bennett, the inanimate projector transformed into a thing or 'actant', and the attention it subsequently demands is what Bennett means when she talks about thing-power. It should be noted that the malfunctioning of the projector, does not make it an object, incapable of drawing attention. Precisely its ability to draw attention even while its broken, is for Bennett indicative of the thing-power to be found in material networks.

But thing-power is not the property of individual actants. Bennett, who draws from Baruch Spinoza here, thinks that we should always understand things as components of networks or assemblages. For Bennett, things are never alone. Because of that, it is more appropriate to talk about thing-power as the function of such an assemblage.[15] Assemblages are thus the grouping of a number of individual actants which generate certain effects—in our projector example the assemblage would be the grouping of projector, projector screen, and the individual presenter itself. When one of the parts (the projector) breaks down, it effects the projector screen (which stops showing the power point), and the human presenter (who probably becomes annoyed). To repeat: assemblages consists of actants. But, when we take a closer look at one of the actants (take the human being, for instance), we note that it itself can be understood as an assemblage of various smaller parts as well.[16] In the case of the North American blackout it might be more appropriate to understand the origins of the blackout as in terms of an assemblage of humans, machines, and electrons. But one can also imagine a situation in which this assemblage is to be better understood as an actant on a much higher level of analysis.[17] Thus, the level of analysis that is being used explains which concept is most appropriate in the specific situation. Lastly, the fact that we as interpreters use concepts such as actant and assemblage to help explain certain effects, indicates that we only become aware of the liveliness of material things in retrospect.[18] For the residents of Ontario, there was, in other words, no assemblage of electricity, power plants and malfunctioning software before their lights went out, their televisions went off, and they slowly became aware of the huge complexity of the origins of this problem.

Because the referent of the notions of actant and assemblage depends on the level of analysis that is being used, and these concepts by definition explain what kind of agent is talked about, categorical distinctions between subject and object, but also between matter and life, become hard to sustain. What best describes an actant or assemblage, depends on the reasons we have for our attempts to understand the effect these things have on us. Bennett, in other words, emphasizes our entanglement with large networks of other things that have an influence on our behavior. She thereby criticized the view that human beings act independently of their environment: “we are also non-human and that things, too, are vital players in the world."[19] For Bennett, action is neither a feature of individual human

14 Latour, *Pandora’s Hope*, 183.

15 Bennett, “The Force of Things,” 353–54.

16 Ibid., 359; Gulshan Ara Khan, “Vital Materiality and Non-Human Agency: An Interview with Jane Bennett,” in *Dialogues with Contemporary Political Theorists*, ed. Gary Browing, Raia Prokhovnik, and Maria Dimova-Cookson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 53.

17 If someone writes a history on the development of electricity networks in the United States, the blackout is only a small part of a much larger story.

18 Khan, “Vital Materiality and Non-Human Agency: An Interview with Jane Bennett,” 44, 53.

19 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 4.

beings, nor of individual things, but always the emergent property of networks of numerous things.[20] Bennett explains that our conventional concept of action is too limited and should be extended to the realm of effects. This makes it possible for her to argue that assemblages *act*.[21] Bennett draws attention to the manner in which intentional action is not the only important factor when explaining the effects our environment has on us, and the effects we have on our surrounding.[22] In a world where human action, intentionality, and subjectivity are not the only factors that need to be taken into account when explaining changes in our environment, how do we still know how to act as members of political communities? How do we treat our fellow members of society, whether these are human or thing? This, I will explain in part II. Now, we take at the ontological view put forward by Barad.

1.2 Barad's phenomenon

Bennett drew her inspiration from a wide array of philosophers and thinkers including Lucretius, Spinoza, Deleuze, Nietzsche, Latour and Adorno. Our current author bases her ontology on disputes in the realm of 'hard science', personified by scholars such as Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr, in combination with a healthy dose of postmodernism provided by Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Donna Haraway. But before we dive head first into a realm wherein epistemology, ontology and ethics are intimately entangled, it is helpful to start again with a short example. In chapter four of *Pandora's Hope*, Latour recounts the story of Louis Pasteur's discovery of the influence of yeast on the process of lactic acid fermentation.[23] Pasteur disagreed with his peers about the role of yeast in processes of fermentation. According to his peers, yeast (which is an organism) did not play a role in the process, which could and should only be explained in a purely chemical way. In a famous paper written by Pasteur, and discussed by Latour, Pasteur, one step at the time, attributes characteristics to the thing (yeast) which according to him causes the fermentation to start. The more attributes the thing receives, the larger its role in the process seems to be. Or, in Bennettian terms: the yeast slowly transformed from an *object*, into a *thing*. But what had happened here? What did Pasteur do when putting forward his thesis about the role of yeast? What is and was the ontological status of this yeast during Pasteur's experiment? Of course, Latour answered these questions himself. But for now, we will focus on the hypothetical answers Karen Barad would have given to these questions.

One way of understanding Pasteur's discovery is the following. By doing scientific experiments, Pasteur found out that a specific thing called yeast caused the process of fermentation. In this analysis, it is assumed that before Pasteur's experiments, a thing called yeast already was to be found in processes of fermentation and we only needed to find that out by looking better at the process. Another assumption is that Pasteur was able to present a theory about yeast which correctly represented the thing called yeast. This view, is what Barad calls representationalism and it is characterized by, among other things, a strict distinction between representations (Pasteur's paper) and the represented objects (the yeast).[24] Inherent in representationalism is the view that there exist separate entities which can be represented through, for example, language.[25] Put differently, representationalism entails the belief that there is a (non-problematic) gap between the concept and the thing. Barad wants to do away with this view, and draws from quantum mechanics and theories on performativity to explain why subject and object are not only inseparable, but also mutually constitutive.

20 Khan, "Vital Materiality and Non-Human Agency: An Interview with Jane Bennett," 52.

21 I will evaluate the argumentative step from effects to actions below.

22 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 32.

23 Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 116.

24 Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 804; Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 46.

25 Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 805–6.

In contrast to representationalism, which holds the world to be consisting out of individual entities waiting to be represented, Barad introduces her theory of 'agential realism'.[26] Drawing from the work of Bohr, Barad argues that neither things nor words have determinate boundaries.[27] According to Barad, Bohr's experiments showed that things do not preexist their measurement.[28] Or, put differently: specific things become the way they are the moment we measure them. This does not mean that the existence of things in the world is dependent upon the human gaze[29], or that the world is merely an idea that exist in our heads.[30] Barad wants to show that things can only be experienced as components of networks, and never as independent things-in-themselves. When she writes that things do not preexist their measurement, she means that the specific things we experience, did not exist as such before we experienced them. This follows from the fact that the thing experienced and the viewer who experiences, are part of the same network, simultaneously bringing each other into being. Thus, while doing research, we make manifest the existence of a certain phenomenon, which we, while doing research on it, become entangled with at the same time. This does not mean that there is no world outside of the network you're in; it merely means that you cannot talk about things which are not in your network. To give an example: imagine you're a scholar working on feminist movements in Europe. While doing research on the movement in, for instance, Denmark, both you and that specific movement become part of a network and change each others ontological status. You become a 'scholar specialized in the feminist movement in Denmark', and the feminist movement in Denmark becomes a 'movement with a certain set of characteristics as analyzed by a certain scholar'. This however, does not mean that there does not exist a feminist movement in, let's say, the United States. Only, from the perspective of the scholar who is unaware of this movement in the US, there is no such movement (yet) (because it is not (yet) in his/her network). In sum: one's existence as a specific being depends on its membership of specific networks which implies that if one is not (yet) part of such a network, one does not exist as such from the point of view of that network.[31]

If this ontological picture of the practice of discovery is correct, it has huge consequences on the representational understanding of Pasteur. We first interpreted Pasteur's experiment as implying that Pasteur discovered a thing which influenced the process of fermentation even before Pasteur was alive. According to Barad, by contrast, we should understand Pasteur and the yeast as a 'phenomenon'. The concept of phenomenon, for Barad, refers to the inseparability of Pasteur and the yeast.[32] We should not understand Pasteur and the yeast as two individual epistemological units, but rather as a phenomenon, for which the unit of analysis is the *relation* between Pasteur and the yeast. Though Bohr said that things with determinate boundaries do not exist, the concept of phenomenon nevertheless leaves some room for 'agential separability'. In my understanding, this means that even though it is not possible to talk about the yeast and (that specific) Pasteur before Pasteur talked about it himself in his paper, it *is* possible to talk about different components *within* the phenomenon itself. This, however, does not mean that these different components are not interrelated anymore; our talking about individual components does not do away with the phenomenon which makes them stand in a certain relation with each other. Thus, in a similar fashion as Bennett, who was able to write about the different parts of the

26 Ibid., 810.

27 Dolphijn and Van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, 62; Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 813.

28 Similar claims have been made by Donna Haraway, an important figure for many new materialists. See: Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003), 12, 20.

29 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 361.

30 Ibid., 379.

31 Of course, this account is not free of difficulties. See below for several remarks on it.

32 Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 814.

assemblage of the North American blackout, Barad is able to discuss various parts of a phenomenon, but only as mutually constitutive and dependent components of that same phenomenon.

We have mainly talked so far about an *experiment* in which a small, tiny organism was discovered by a large human scientist in a laboratory. What does that say about world outside of the lab? Or to go even further: to what extent are the results of Bohr's experiments on the quantum level, to be extrapolated to the realm of human affairs? Barad argues that the indeterminacy and entanglement of particles in the realm of (Bohrian) quantum mechanics, determines the indeterminacy and entanglement on the 'human' level as well.[33] There are, in other words, no relevant differences between a laboratory experiment and a social practice. Because for Bohr things have no determinate boundaries, it is not possible to limit an agential realist understanding of the world to the context of the laboratory.[34] Moreover, the implicit distinction made in the last sentences between the world of science and the social world is itself the product of a phenomenon. This stance echos Latour's argument about the distinction between society and nature. Latour argued that the distinction between the world of humans and nature is a myth. What we consider 'nature' is a man-made belief about a certain range of entities in the world. Latour preferred to talk about the 'collective', or an association of humans and non-humans. But whereas Latour (and Bennett) are able to still discuss the effects of individual actants, for Barad, there are no things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena left at all. For her all what is being experienced is the result of intra-active materializations (Because the word 'interaction' presupposes the existence of preexisting things, Barad uses the word intra-action.). Or in her own words: “[t]he world is an ongoing open process of mattering through which “mattering” itself acquires meaning and form in the realization of different agential possibilities."[35] When we cannot definitely isolate individual components from their place in their network, it becomes also impossible to ascribe agency to these individual things. Barad, therefore, explains that we should understand agency not as a property but as the enactment of the entanglements which we experience as phenomena.[36] Consequently, there is no room for actants in Barad's ontology.

This makes agential realism a post-humanist theory; it does not revolve around the actions of individual human beings anymore. Humans (and to be fair, all things) are mere products of the intra-actions of the components of a phenomenon. This ontology wherein things *are,* only when experienced as components of a phenomenon, might be understood as a radicalized version of Bennett's picture of living matter. Barad started with abstract theories about the intra-action of particles and waves (Heisenberg, Bohr), and moved towards an all encompassing theory about how things *are* (not, actually), to eventually end with an 'ethics of mattering'. What kind of direction such an ethics takes is the topic of part II. Now, we continue with our third ontology—that of Braidotti.

1.3 Braidotti's Oncomouse

We previously encountered the example of the failing electricity grid, and that of the discovery of the influence of yeast on processes of fermentation by Pasteur. I explained that both examples can be used, and being are used, to emphasize the manner in which things in the world (whether these are human or non-human) are always embedded in large, complicated networks made up of various other things. For

33 See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 388., where Barad casually switches from the level of quantum physics, to that of scientific practice. See also page 70, 82, 85, 88, 109-111, 277, 324 and footnote 55 on page 416, where she explains that there are no reasons to limit the impact of quantum mechanics to a micro level. This however, is contested. See S. S. Schweber, “Karen Barad. Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning.,” *Isis* 99, no. 4 (2008): 881. For the sake of the argument, I assume that Barad is right in this respect.

34 Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 816. Note that this is Barad's reading of Bohr, who had a more limited conception of the scientific experiment in mind. See also: Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway,* 145–46, 148, 167.

35 Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 817.

36 Ibid., 818; Dolphijn and Van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, 54–55.

Bennett this entanglement of actants was reason to critically rethink conventional notions of agency. Barad went even further and argued that we should do away with the notion of actant as well, and replace these with that of the phenomenon, describing the way reality constantly changes and constitutes itself. Our final materialist, Rosi Braidotti, complicates these entanglements even more. One way to introduce her ontology is with help of the often cited example of the 'Oncomouse'.[37] The Oncomouse is a genetically engineered mouse designed in such a way that it has a higher susceptibility to cancer. This higher sensitivity makes the mouse very interesting for companies researching and developing treatments for the disease. The Oncomouse is the product of a complicated process wherein a large variety of actants were involved. These ranged from individual researchers, the medical industry, and lots of mice, to products affecting the genetic makeup of the animals, cancer, women with breast cancer, and so forth. For at least two reasons, I think the Oncomouse functions as a good example to help introducing the work of Braidotti. In the first place, it questions conventional distinctions between nature and society, and the way the latter effects the former. What is, for instance, the difference between the 'natural' evolution of a species, and the production of the Oncomouse? Secondly, the Oncomouse illustrates the problematic relation of capitalism and the disciplining of bodies. It is an example of how capitalist structures produce bodies or stimulate the production of bodies for the sake of making profit.[38] The distinction between nature and society, and the influence of capitalism on the construction of identities, are two important themes to be found in the work of Braidotti. Her materialist theory collapses this distinction and aims to counter the exploitative character of capitalist, and related humanist, and anthropocentric structures.

What kind of materialism does Braidotti propose? Among others, Braidotti draws from Spinoza, Henri Bergson, and Gilles Deleuze to put forward a picture of a subject which is characterized by relationality, immanence, and duration.[39] This notion of the 'nomadic subject' aims to “free subject formation from the normative vision of the self”, or to remove all connotations with conventional notions of the individual.[40] Although the ontological characteristics of this nomadic subject are directly related to the ethical ones, the remaining of this chapter will only elaborate on the ontological ones, and leave the ethical implications of these in the dark until we arrive at chapter two. The basic presupposition at work in Braidotti's theory is that all things (whether these are human, animal, machine, or simply thing) are part of a network wherein power relations determine the specific 'intensity' of the relationship one part of the network has, with another part.[41] The consequences of this monistic materialist worldview are that one cannot definitely distinguish individual parts of the material network, and that it becomes more appropriate to give primacy to relations between parts, rather than focusing on the parts itself.[42] The second important stance Braidotti takes is her dismissal of the Cartesian distinction between mind and matter. As hinted on above, for Braidotti, all mental activities are actually material, which explains her constant emphasis on the immanent character of her

37 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 76; Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan©_Meets_Oncomouse™* (London: Routledge, 1997), 79–858; Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 202; Rosi Braidotti, “Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others,” *PMLA* 124, no. 2 (2009): 529.

38 Rosi Braidotti, “Feminist Epistemology after Postmodernism: Critiquing Science, Technology and Globalisation,” *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 32, no. 1 (2007): 66.

39 Rosi Braidotti, “Affirmation versus Vulnerability: On Contemporary Ethical Debates,” *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy* 10, no.1 (2006), 237.

40 Braidotti, “Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others,” 527.

41 Braidotti, “Affirmation versus Vulnerability: On Contemporary Ethical Debates,” 239; Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Published by Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 17.

42 Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 136.

theory. If it is the case that one can only understand processes of thinking in terms of their material, embodied character, and there are no clear-cut distinctions between different types of matter, it starts to make sense to see matter in general as something potentially intelligent.[43] Her argument seems to go roughly as follows: matter is self-organized (autopoietic) and has the capacity to store information (in genetic codes, for instance). Since all matter, by virtue of her monistic materialism, is interrelated, and intelligence is the capacity to story information, matter is potentially intelligent. Braidotti's monistic materialism also has an impact on our conventional notion of subjectivity which is enlarged without designating beforehand in what kind of subject this would result.[44] Similarly, if it is the case that subjects are living beings, but one can only understand them as material configurations, liveliness becomes a property of these material configurations as well. Braidotti, in other words, radically expands our conventional idea of what is alive and intelligent without putting forward *a priori* restrictions on the kind of beings capable of intelligence and/or liveliness.

After her critique on the conventional distinctions between humans, animals, machines and things, and her expansion of the notion of life, a third Spinozean assumption is at work. This is the idea that human beings have a built-in inclination to understand what kind of relationships limit their ability to increase the intensity of the relationships they have with other components of the network, and try to restructure these limitations in such a way that these intensities increase.[45] Individuals, therefore, constantly aim for a better understanding of their place in the world to be able to improve the relationships they have with that world, or their 'endurance'. The result of these three presupposition is that all entities are in 'becoming', or: in a constant process of transformation.[46] This ontological picture of how the world works satisfies the more general aims of Braidotti's work of rejecting essentialist notions of the individual by putting forward a new vocabulary which can counter dominant discourses about the topic.[47] To conclude: this nomadic conception of subjectivity is a means of dealing with dominant discourses on identities by emphasizing the immanent and relational character of identity-formation. The careful reader might find it difficult to grasp how Braidotti's rejection of essences adds up with her Spinozean assumptions about the character of human beings. This is a legitimate worry but I assume Braidotti would reply by arguing that the human characteristics following from the Spinozean materialism, are different from claims made about the identity of certain beings. The metaphysical fact that entities strive for an improvement of their endurance is not the same as the normative categories of human, woman or man. Again, whether one is convinced by this distinction depends on whether one is convinced by Braidotti's monistic materialism in the first place.

1.4 Conclusions

All three authors discussed argue that we should understand the world in terms of networks. But where Bennett and Barad, are able to distinguish different interacting networks, Braidotti's monism blurs the distinctions between different networks even more and emphasizes their entanglement. The way our authors relate to these material networks informs their views on conventional notions of action, which

43 Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 60. The strength of her argument depends upon her definition of 'intelligence' and her belief in the monist materialist character of existence. For the sake of the argument, let's assume Braidotti is right on these two points.

44 Ibid.; Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 160–61.

45 Braidotti, "Affirmation versus Vulnerability: On Contemporary Ethical Debates," 240–41; Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 161–62; Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 56.

46 "The frame of reference becomes open-ended, interrelational, multisexed, and transspecies flows of becoming by interaction with multiple others" (Braidotti, "Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others," 527). This, however, does not mean that one cannot talk about identities per se (Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 94).

47 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 7, 137; Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 138.

are in various ways, abandoned, and replaced by views which allow these networks to act. Bennett and Barad, for instance, explicitly state that action should be seen as a property of assemblages or phenomena. Of course, these arguments are not unproblematic. For Bennett, it is unclear how human beings and non-human things differ from each other. She explains that there are differences, but not what they exactly are and how this influences the conception of action she develops. For Barad, it is not completely clear why her conclusions based on quantum theory were also valid in the 'social-political' realm. Barad says that this is simply the case and that she sees no reason to postulate an ontology consisting out of two different domains characterized by two different laws of nature. Because of my lacking knowledge about quantum mechanics, I simply accept that she is correct here. More interesting and difficult is the justification of a theory which states that one can only understand the world in terms of phenomena. How do I know that Barad's picture of reality, is also the way how *I* should understand the phenomenon I am part off? For Braidotti, the problem is slightly different. For instance: why should matter, in general, be inclined to increase its endurance in the world? Why is this the correct way of understanding how matter matters? On these, and other difficulties of new materialist accounts of reality, I elaborate on in chapter three. For now, we leave the realm of ontology, and continue with the ethical implications of these accounts.

2. Ethics

In this chapter, we focus on the ethical implications of a new materialist worldview. Again, we start with Bennett, continue with Barad and end with Braidotti. The chapter itself ends with a conclusion in which I summarize their positions, and shortly indicate the advantages and disadvantages of a new materialist ethics, before moving on to chapter three.

2.1 Bennett’s utopia

As explained above, Bennett tried to convince her readers that matter can act, and in a sense, therefore be alive. As also hinted on before, Bennett's main motivation of exploring this liveliness of matter seems to be of ethical nature, and to be more specific: one involving a concern for the (American) environment. I think that the ethical-political part of Bennett's picture can best be divided into three parts. There's in the first place an interesting meta-ethical argument to be found in her work which involves the cultivation of a certain 'receptiveness' for the liveliness of matter. Secondly, there is an argument based on self-interest. Thirdly, there is an argument about the direction a theory of democracy would have to go when you take matter seriously.

Let us start with Bennett's meta-ethical claim. Bennett worries about the enormous amount of harmful waste produced by the American economy. She links the harmful effects of this waste production[48] to the widespread idea that waste is dull or passive matter, ready to be used by us. By proposing a new way of looking at matter (including trash), she hopes to disrupt consumptive practices which contribute to the production of waste and subsequently, the damaging of ecosystems.[49] I think we should read this 'new way of looking' quite literary. Bennett argues that before we can talk about the institutionalization of practices, we first need to rethink our bodily practices. An enhanced sense of the liveliness of matter stimulates the acceptances of certain ethical principles which eventually will lead towards the actual endorsement of these principles.[50] Or, as Bennett writes: “[t]here will be no greening of the economy, no redistribution of wealth, no enforcement or extension of rights without human

48 See also: Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*, 114.

49 Khan, “Vital Materiality and Non-Human Agency: An Interview with Jane Bennett,” 50; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, ix–x.

50 Khan, “Vital Materiality and Non-Human Agency: An Interview with Jane Bennett,” 50, 52; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xi–xii.

dispositions, moods, and cultural ensembles hospitable to these effects."[51] Bennett, in other words, believes that a necessary requirement for the actualization of moral principles is the establishment of an ethical disposition, or mood.[52]

But what kind of mood are we actually talking about? Firstly, this mood consist of an 'anticipatory readiness' or 'receptiveness' to the effects that objects have on us and what makes them things or actants.[53] According to Bennett, we should not ignore the numerous ways we as human beings interact with the things in and around us. This open attitude towards the effects of things is reinforced by a form of naivety towards the liveliness of things.[54] In contrast to the tendency to ascribe the cause of changes in the world around us always to intentional beings, Bennett argues for a postponement of this inclination, and the acceptance of a 'touch of anthropomorphism,'[55] stimulating the open attitude towards the manner humans and things are intertwined. Even though anthropomorphism is usually considered as troublesome by philosophers, Bennett explains, it might be a valuable method to become conscious of the fact that human agency is not sufficiently capable of explaining the effects we have on our world, and the effects our surrounding has on us.[56]

Drawing from Theodor Adorno, Bennett further explicates the attitude one should develop towards matter by suggesting three techniques.[57] In the first place, one should be critical about the way one understand one's environment by using concepts. There is always a certain gap between a concept and the thing to which it refers, and reflection on your conceptualization can make you conscious of this gap and, if necessary, help to open it. The second technique borrowed from Adorno by Bennett is that of 'playful thinking'. One should be very conscious of the fact that a full understanding of the world is not to be attained in the form of language while at the same time deal with this fundamental impossibility as if it did not exist. Though Bennett is not very clear about how this should work in practice, playful thinking might reinforce the idea that (human) language is not all that matters in dealing with our experiences. Technique number three is that of utopian thinking. According to Adorno, in the words of Bennett, you should not let yourself be restricted by what is known, and engage in unrealistic thought experiments. A critic can argue that *Vibrant Matter* itself is the result of years of mastering this technique. Regardless of what readers think about the practicability of these techniques and attitudes, they do show the relevance of being very critical about the interdependence of human and non-human entities, and the never completely successful linguistic attempts of humans of making sense of this interdependence.

But we should not master such attitudes and techniques for ecological reasons only. Bennett explicitly argues that we should cultivate an 'enlightened self-interest' because we are part of such material networks ourselves.[58] She writes that “in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself. Such an enlightened or expanded notion of self-interest is *good for humans*."[59] The kernel of her argument lies in he notion of *self* which is criticized in her account of vibrant matter. The self is enlarged and extends over the physical boundaries of our bodies. Our self-interest, consequently, also expands and one seems to be morally demanded to take the interests of a larger self into account than what is usually done in theories on moral responsibility.

51 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xii.
52 Ibid.
53 Bennett, “The Force of Things,” 350, 358.
54 Ibid., 357; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 16–17.
55 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 99.
56 Ibid., 120.
57 Bennett, “The Force of Things,” 362–63; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xv, 14-15.
58 Bennett, “The Force of Things,” 361; Khan, “Vital Materiality and Non-Human Agency: An Interview with Jane Bennett,” 51.
59 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 13.

Moreover, because the contours of assemblages only appear in retrospect after the effects are felt, moral responsibility only kicks in after the harm is done. The ethical task, Bennett argues, becomes to 'reverse engineer' the functioning of the assemblage, and to adjust the assemblage and your own position in it in such a way that the suffering done, is minimized and compensated.[60] Because responsibility is distributed over a large variety of different actants, acts of praise and blame should be distributed over these actants as well. This does not mean that we should do away with the distinction between persons and things completely. There are (gradual, not categorical) differences between the two, though we should develop a respectful attitude towards the latter when assigning praise and blame. Bennett gives the example of HIV, which is meant to explain how we should deal with actants that harm the networks they are in.[61] Initially, doctors tried to eradicate the virus when it had entered a human body. A side effect of these attempts of killing the virus was that the host often died as well. In contrast to eradication, another form of therapy now aims to foster a coexistence between the host and the virus by not killing the latter, but by reducing its numbers in the body. For Bennett, this new therapy shows respect for the thing-power of HIV by altering the relations between different parts of the human-virus network.

How how does all this relate to the political project Bennett had in mind? Here Bennett draws from the work of John Dewey and Jacques Rancière.[62] For Bennett, Dewey's conception of the public forms a valuable link between new materialism and democratic theory. According to Dewey, a public can best be characterized as “set of bodies affected by a common problem generated by a pulsing swarm of activities."[63] Bennett reads his theory with Spinoza in the back of her mind and understands Dewey as saying that political actions are actions done by bodies that have an effect on other bodies, without that there necessarily have to be an intention behind them. These actions are by definition enmeshed in a network consisting out of other bodies which all are thrown into that same network, which becomes a public the moment a problem emerges. The fact that a public emerges out of the interaction of different entities is important for Bennett because it enables her to argue that it is possible to let non-humans determine the scope of the public by affecting the bodies in their vicinity.[64]

Bennett also includes the work of Rancière to specify the functioning of such a public. Rancière is concerned with the conditions under which political subjects are included in the public. The ideal democratic act for him consist in one which shows how the choices for inclusion and exclusion of subjects have been made.[65] Or, put differently, a genuine political act is one which disrupts the status quo, or the 'partition of the sensible', and makes visible who have or what has previously been excluded from the public (debate). The metaphor he uses in this context is important because it pertains directly to the importance Bennett ascribes to bodily practices which form the groundwork onto which we should build or ethical-political behavior. Political action, for Bennett, is very much related to the interaction of different bodies and the explicit and implicit hierarchies which structure their relations. The scope of these interactions (and therefore the scope of the public) is delimited by the particular problem which binds all related bodies together, and the character of the problem depends on the way previously excluded bodies, voice their interest. Thus, Rancière's conception of the political act nicely grasps the fluid, uncertain and efficacious character of the assemblage which is so central to Bennett's theory.

60 Khan, “Vital Materiality and Non-Human Agency: An Interview with Jane Bennett,” 53.
61 Ibid., 51.
62 For a similar approach, see: Marres, *Material Participation*, chap. 2.
63 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 101.
64 Ibid., 102.
65 Ibid., 105.

2.3 Barad's response-ability

We saw previously that Barad deconstructed a large part of the conventional notions with which we make sense of ourselves, our surroundings, and our place in the world. But what if every*thing* only appears in the form of a phenomenon (even 'ourselves'), how does that influence our ability to act ethically? And is it even appropriate to ask that question from the first-person point of view? This is an even more difficult question to grasp and answer than it initially might seem. Because not things only appear to us in the form of phenomena, our notions of causality and time are also constituted in processes of intra-action. These considerations about the entanglement of matter in all its variations are for Barad reason to argue that epistemology, ontology and ethics are inseparable as well.[66] Since there are no determinate agents or actants, ethics, in this agential realist view of reality, is not about finding out what the right response is to something else.[67] Ethics, by contrast, is an intrinsic part of the manner in which the various components of a phenomenon are entangled with each other. Barad draws here from Emmanuel Levinas and argues that existence is inherently ethical. Ethics for him (and for Barad), is not about certain actions we do, but about the responsibility we have towards other subjects. When we encounter other subjects, they make a pre-cognitive demand on us to not harm them. Or, put differently, when we meet the other subject, it makes an ethical appeal on us to not harm and kill them. Encountering the body of the other is enough to communicate that appeal, which makes it possible for Barad to argue that the relation one has to the other, is one of embodied responsibility, where responsibility now refers to the 'ability to respond'.[68] This specific (and quite vague) notion of responsibility has not much to do with conventional ideas about being responsible for the consequences of one's actions: Barad explains that "the notion of consequences is based on the wrong temporality: asking after potential consequences is too little, too late, because ethics of course, is being done right at the lab bench."[69] Ethics and responsibility is thus neither about conscious decision-making (which opens the door for ethical and responsible non-human forms of matter[70]), nor about being responsible for one's actions of the past. Responsibility, for Barad, seems to have something do with one's stance within the constantly changing webs of causal relations. And to be a bit more specific: one's accountability for the entities that are included in these networks and why. That is, at least how I read the following two passages:

> "The point of challenging traditional epistemologies is not merely to welcome females, slaves, children, animals, and other dispossessed Others (exiled from the land of knowers by Aristotle more than two millennia ago) into the field of knowers but to better account for the ontology of knowing."[71]

> "Therefore accountability and responsibility must be thought in terms of what matters and what is excluded from mattering."[72]

So there still seems to be a possibility to talk about the composition of the kind of networks or

66 Dolphijn and Van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, 69.

67 Ibid.; Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 391.

68 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 392; Dolphijn and Van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, 55, 69; Karen Barad, "On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am," *Differences* 23, no. 3 (January 1, 2012): 217.

69 Dolphijn and Van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, 53.

70 Barad, "On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am," 210; Dolphijn and Van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, 55.

71 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 378.

72 Ibid., 394.

phenomena, and the effects one has on these networks. Responsibility according to this view has to do with stimulating an enlarged sensitivity for the manner in which these networks function[73], or how the 'cuts' between the various components of the network are made.

Let's take a look at one example of such a disposition or attitude often put forward in these contexts.[74] Barbara Smuts is a bio-anthropologist who did research on baboons in Tanzania. She was trained to keep her distance and not disturb the baboons while doing her observations. However, Smuts was unable to satisfactorily observe the primates because they kept keeping an eye out for her, kept responding to her, and in general, did not behave as usual. Though her training taught her the importance of keeping a distance between herself and her object, she realized that this distance made it impossible to satisfactorily research the baboons. She decided to ignore her trained notions of objectivity and distance, and started to interact with the baboons, and by doing so, became a member of the group of baboons. For Barad (and also for Haraway[75]), Smuts acted responsible because objectivity has nothing to do with distancing, but being *responsive* to the other entities in your surrounding. Though Barad does not elaborate much on the example, it might be helpful to draw a parallel with Benhabib's generalized and concrete others. The notion of the generalized other is used by Benhabib to designate philosophical conceptions of the subject which are very abstract, universal and in a sense quite shallow: these do not incorporate the specific contexts in which subjects dwell.[76] Moreover, because they do not think it is relevant or necessary to include the social-historical-political background of subjects, these characteristics fall outside of the procedures of arriving at justice. By contrast, the concrete other is the subject which does attempt to include its relevant context. These two perspectives can also be read in the Smuts-example. Initially, the baboons were seen as generalized others. Not only was the goal of the research to arrive at a general theory of baboon behavior, the way Smuts approached the baboons was also informed by a general theory about how one should do science. Unfortunately, the lack of specific attention to these particular baboons let to Smut's inability to do her work. The solution was to adopt to these specific circumstances, try to understand this specific group of baboons, and thereby take their particularities into account. Being responsible, is thus, in my reading, the ability to understand the other as a concrete other, and the attempt to take it's concrete interests into account.

Barad extends this type of responsibility to the realm of things and calls it 'diffraction'. This 'practice of diffraction' is the method which helps grasping the 'differences that matter'. This method emphasizes the fact that understanding, knowing and analyzing are all engagements with matter which necessarily categorizes the phenomenon into its different components. For Barad, "[t]here is not knowing from a distance", and producing theory requires an open, attentive and curious attitude towards the world.[77] Barad's method of diffraction resembles Bennett's argument about the importance of a slight touch of anthropomorphism, and a receptive attitude towards the effects one has on the network one is part of, and the effects the network has on oneself. The difficulty, however, is that Barad does not seem to allow for any form of reverse engineering, as Bennett argued for. Barad does not believe in notions of conventional causation and time which allow for the compensation of harm done to components of the phenomenon. As she writes at the end of her book, "This" and "that", "here" and "now," don't preexist what happens but come alive with each meeting."[78] Barad's sketches a picture of a universe which cannot be more alive. But this attempt to fill the gap between concept and thing, might

73 Barad, "On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am," 207.
74 Dolphijn and Van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, 56.
75 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 23–24.
76 Benhabib, *Situating the Self*.
77 Barad, "On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am," 207.
78 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 396.

be not the type of playfulness meant by Adorno as explained previously. When completely ignoring the rules of the game, the game stops being fun, and it might become imperative to return to reality and think about what when wrong.[79]

2.3 Braidotti's freedom

The example of the Oncomouse introduced above illustrates nicely two important themes to be found in the work of Braidotti. In the first place there was the distinction between society and nature and its relation with identity formation. In the second place did the example bring attention to the disciplining character of capitalist structures and discourses. Braidotti argued that the relentless quest for profit inherent to capitalism violates free forms of identity formation because it produces and influences identities for the sake of making profit. The relationship between Braidotti's critique of dominant discourses, her ontology, and the direction her ethics moves is intimate, but for the sake of a better understanding of her position, I distinguish between four different parts of her ethics, and conclude by looking at the consequences these can have in practice.

Firstly, the goal of a 'nomadic subject' (see 1.3) is the increase of its freedom. This is done through reaching a better understanding of its 'passions' and 'bondage'.[80] Passions here refers to the desire the subject has to engage in interactions with its environment. Bondage refers to all discourses and structures which are potentially limiting the subject's ability to increase the intensity of these interactions. It is good to remind oneself here of the monistic materialistic character of Braidotti's ontology. This form of materialism considers everything as part of the same substance which entails that all different parts of a network, are by definition related to each other, and that one can only speak about the *intensity* of the relationships one has with other parts of the network. In other words: one cannot be *not* part of other parts of the network. Freedom thus, is the result of understanding what kind of relationships hinder your innate desire to increase the intensity of your relationships with the world, which makes it possible to transform this knowledge into action.

But this does not mean that all actions stimulating the intensity of these relationships are allowed. There are limits to what a subject can do and these are determined by its body, and by an 'enlarged' version of Kant's categorical imperative. Braidotti explains that her ethics is about forces and desires and not about the establishment of a moral framework consisting of rules.[81] She dismisses all forms of ethics which try to explain the limits to our behavior in terms of rules, rights or maxims and instead argues that finding these limits is a collective quest in search of our bodily limits.[82] Examples of these bodily limits indicating when we should stop acting are: having fear, falling ill, being anxious, nauseous, or developing a general sense of insecurity.[83] From the perspective of practically every form of ethics, bodily limits explaining when we have reached an ethical boundary might seem odd, or even obnoxious. But from the Spinozean materialism Braidotti uses, it makes sense to not talk about rules explaining how you should deal with *other* individuals, because there are no separated individuals in that sense: there is only one type of substance (a material network, in my understanding), composed out of individual parts which are all related to each other, and one can only increase or decrease the intensity of the relationship one has with other parts. The second argument explaining why we sometimes should stop following our desire to increase the intensity of our relationships with the

79 On the 'spoil-sport' ('spelbreker') who ignores or breaks the rules of a game (in our case, the Adornian game of playful thinking), see: Johan Huizinga, *Humo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949).

80 Braidotti, "Affirmation versus Vulnerability: On Contemporary Ethical Debates," 240, 249; Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 148; Braidotti, "Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others," 530.

81 Braidotti, "Affirmation versus Vulnerability: On Contemporary Ethical Debates," 236.

82 Ibid., 235–36, 239; Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 259; Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 146.

83 Braidotti, "Affirmation versus Vulnerability: On Contemporary Ethical Debates," 239.

network, is based on a Kant's categorical imperative.[84] In a similar way as Bennett did, Braidotti argues that because there is only one network, harming other parts in that network equals harming yourself.[85] This explains Braidotti's comment that one's desire to increase one's relationships with others is a collective activity: “we” are in this together”, it is “a group project that connects active, conscious, and desiring citizens."[86]

But how can a better understanding of our bondage and limits (note that these are not equal) help us increase our freedom? A nomadic subject has to go through a third step, namely a process of dis-identification or de-personalization.[87] Braidotti argues that before one could get rid off dominant normative models that limit one's ability of self-transformation, one should start with a thorough understanding of the kind of identity that is being coerced by those structures (the minority). Such an understanding is necessary because ignoring this step and immediately proposing solutions in the form of a new identity denies the complex history of the position the minority was in.[88] Furthermore, an understanding of the position of the minority is needed to fully grasp the struggle of deliberately abandoning the identity and related habits one had under the dominant normative model.[89] Braidotti explains that this process is difficult and painful but that a nomadic subject should remember that the idea of experiencing pain as an *individual* does not make sense from a monistic materialist point-of-view.[90] For Braidotti, experiencing pain is something senselessness which cannot be compensated and for which no one cannot be really responsible. A nomadic subject should adopt the Nietzschean attitude of *amor fati*, stop compensating for the harm that was done, and transform these negative experiences into positive ones. On the one hand, this means that one should transform the experiences which decrease the intensity of the relationships one has with the world, into ones which increase those intensities. And on the other, an acknowledgment of “the futility of even answering that question [of the meaning of suffering]."[91]

To summarize: the freedom of nomadic subjects depends on their ability to understand the way their identity comes to be. This process of identity-formation is dependent on dominant discourses, and the subject's ability to transform the effects of these discourses into more intense relationships with the world. Processes of identity-formation are painful but the appropriate manner to deal with these is to adopt an attitude of *amor fati*, stop pointing fingers at the causes or origins of your pain, and accept that there is no satisfying answer to the question of the meaning of your suffering. It does not need explanation that this ideal ethical attitude of the nomadic subject is very abstract. Does Braidotti explain what kind of consequences such a nomadic ethics can have in practice? Unfortunately, Braidotti's dismissal of moral rules in general makes it difficult for her to say anything how a nomadic subject would function in practice, in the real world. I nevertheless, want to present two[92] examples

84 Braidotti's enlarged version of Kant's imperative is: “do not to others, what you would not want done to yourself." This, however, seems to be a version of the 'golden rule', rather than a version of one of Kant's formulations of the categorical imperative.

85 Braidotti, “Affirmation versus Vulnerability: On Contemporary Ethical Debates,” 238; Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 158.

86 Braidotti, “Affirmation versus Vulnerability: On Contemporary Ethical Debates,” 244; Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 85, 166.

87 Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 40; Braidotti, “Affirmation versus Vulnerability: On Contemporary Ethical Debates,” 242.

88 Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 40; Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, 29.

89 Braidotti, “Affirmation versus Vulnerability: On Contemporary Ethical Debates,” 242.

90 Ibid., 248.

91 Ibid.; Rosi Braidotti, “The Politics of ‘Life Itself’ and New Ways of Dying,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana H Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2010), 214.

92 A number of other, often ill-elaborated examples which highlight aspects of a nomadic ethics are to be found in her comments on 'micropolitics' (Braidotti, “The Politics of ‘Life Itself’ and New Ways of Dying,” 210; Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 37; Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, 269.), 'statelessness' (Ibid., 272.), the second feminist wave (Ibid., 276.), and her favorite authors (Deleuze, Haraway, Hardt and Negri, Massumi) as personifications of her nomadic subjectivity

Braidotti gives which could give an indication of the direction her ethics can go. In the first place Braidotti describes a group of militant feminist who traveled in former Yugoslavia to visit places where war crimes had been committed.[93] It is exemplary of a form of nomadic activism because the caravan of feminists implicitly criticized the different borders they crossed, and because they themselves took their travels as an opportunity to deal with their troubled and painful history. A second example involves boundary-setting, and trying to take the interests of others into account. The question is whether smokers are allowed to smoke, while it is clear that smoking is harmful to themselves, and can harm others as well.[94] Braidotti argues that it would be a form of life fetishism to condemn all freely chosen harmful activities. She explains that because of the fact that smokers and non-smokers are part of the same network (my words, again), “negotiations have to be held."[95] As someone interested in democratic theory, I read the word negotiations as implying that disagreements between nomadic subjects about the direction of the good life should be solved through processes of deliberation. If my intuition here is correct, this opens up a complete realm of possibilities in which interests can be negotiated (e.g., by deliberating), and closes a range of possible other ways of dealing with disagreements as well (e.g., authoritarian rule).

2.4 Conclusions

All our three authors put forward different ways of dealing with ourselves and other things in our environment. Bennett's arguments are informed by her ontology, but do not dependent on a specific view of reality. This means that one can adopt most[96] of the ethical principles Bennett proposes without necessarily accepting her ontology. Barad's ethics, by contrast, is directly determined by the way reality is constituted, and cannot be read in isolation from it. The gap between 'is' and 'ought' is no more and replaced by self-constitutive phenomena. Braidotti's nomad hinges on the presupposition that freedom depends on the intensity of one's relationships with the world. This makes it possible for her to emphasize the importance of increasing the intensities of the relationships one has with its environment. Put differently, Braidotti's ethics is informed by her ontology, but she can give reasons to nomadic subjects for acting in certain ways. Moreover, I understand Braidotti's project in general as one with as its main goals to dismantle dominant discourses which unjustifiably prescribe and influence conceptions of identity. Braidotti's main motivation is thus of ethical nature, and I understand her ontology as a means of communicating her ethical-political message, and not as its grounding, as it functioned for Barad.

In sum: both Bennett and Braidotti try to bridge the gap between ontology (is) and ethics (ought) by giving reasons (an argument) for acting in certain ways. Some of these reasons can be derived from their ontological picture of the world, some of them cannot. Barad, in contrast, completely fills this gap between 'is' and 'ought' by arguing that ontology, epistemology and ethics are simultaneously constituted. Though the relationship between the 'is' and he 'ought' thus seems to differ, it is remarkable that all three authors refrain from putting forward substantive moral judgments. Because there are no (and there should not be) stable, definite identities, developing moral accounts equals digging your own grave by prescribing certain conceptions of identity, their argument seems to be. Moral frameworks designating who should do what, simply do not go together with an ontology in which every*thing* is in a constant process of transformation. Our authors therefore focus on attitudes rather than rules or rights. What to make of such accounts? Does it help us understand our place as

(Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 179–81.).

93 Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 88.

94 Ibid., 224.

95 Ibid.

96 Only the self-interested argument I presented depends on her ontological premises.

political subjects in our non-modern world, or did our authors, together with the modern subject, throw away every possible means of making sense of communicating with others about our experiences? The answer, as I will explain, lies somewhere in the middle.

3. Evaluative chapter: the truth and method of new materialism

In this final chapter we take a closer look at the methodology used by our new materialists. In contrast to scholars who focus on specific parts in the ontological and ethical arguments presented so far[97], I think it is more appropriate to understand them as 'weak ontological' proposals aimed at changing implicit presuppositions of members of political collectives. Regardless of the truth-value of their ontological claims or the strength of their ethical ones, they should be read as original attempts to bring about political change without thereby necessarily proposing legal change or new moral frameworks. My argument is divided into three sections. In section 3.1, I focus on the style of writing to be found in new materialists accounts of reality and explain that their work can best be characterized as 'figures of the thinkable'. In section 3.2, I elaborate on one specific 'figure of the thinkable' (Bennett's), and argue that her work should be understood as a form of 'weak ontology' wherein affects and attitudes have an important role. Section 3.3 explores several (meta-ethical and epistemological) difficulties that arise when granting affects a central role in moral theorizing, and presents directions in which one can look for answers to them. I argue that the political relevance of new materialist writings is to be found in their attempts to deconstruct potentially harmful moral blind spots or implicit biases.

3.1 Writing matters, or practicing extraordinary language philosophy

> "Why do you write so badly?"
> "Well, look. If I wrote as clearly as you do, people in Paris would not take me seriously."
> "So why don't you write clearly?"
> "In France, it would be regarded as somewhat childish and naive if you wrote clearly. (..) In France, you gotta have ten per cent incomprehensible, otherwise people wouldn't think it is deep. They won't think that you're a profound thinker."[98]

Above conversation was narrated by John Searle and illustrates his perplexity when comparing on the one hand, Foucault's verbal, and on the other hand his written intelligibility. According to Searle, Foucault could talk "just as clearly" as he did, while his written work remained a mystery for him. Foucault apparently explained to Searle that clarity when doing philosophy in France is not one of the greatest values while writing, but in contrast, ought not to be found in such high degree in the works of great thinkers as it is demanded on the other side of the canal. Searle is not the only one having difficulties with understanding postmodern continental philosophers. In a notoriously unsympathetic review of Butler's work, Martha Nussbaum describes the difficulties she had with Butler, and of which two of them are relevant in the present context.[99] Firstly, there is again the question of clarity. As already introduced by Searle, and previously justified by Braidotti (see 1.3), clarity and attempts to

97 Examples are: Bonnie Washick et al., "Politics That Matter: Thinking about Power and Justice with the New Materialists," *Contemporary Political Theory* 14, no. 1 (2015): 63–89; Sharon R. Krause, "Bodies in Action: Corporeal Agency and Democratic Politics," *Political Theory* 39, no. 3 (2011): 299–324; Paul Rekret, "A Critique of New Materialism: Ethics and Ontology," *Subjectivity* 9, no. 3 (2016): 225–45.

98 Searle, John, 'Foucault and Bourdieu on continental obscurantism'. YouTube video, 5:53, excerpt, posted by "theorrhea," December 18, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvwhEIhv3N0.

99 Many responded to Nussbaum's critique. See: Warren Hedges et al., "Martha C. Nussbaum and Her Critics: An Exchange," *New Republic* 220, no. 16 (April 19, 1999): 43–45. None of the commentators explicitly dealt with Nussbaum's comments on Butler's style of writing, on which I focus here.

explain to those who are unfamiliar with the work of Deleuze, Foucault, Butler and others, is not high on their list of priorities. Butler in Nussbaum's essay, and Barad and Braidotti in mine, presuppose a familiarity of their audience with a large number of authors and topics. Braidotti is aware of her difficult writing style and explains that her self-proclaimed lack of clarity should be seen as a critique of the "despotic tendency of contemporary scientific discourse" to favor transparency and scientific clarity.[100] For Braidotti, the specific manner in which people communicate is not merely a means towards a certain end, but part of the communicative act itself (thinking is a material activity[101]). And since one of the important arguments she puts forward is about the importance of embodying your beliefs about the good life, it makes sense to adjust your style of writing accordingly. Moreover, one can interpret her refusal to engage in clear writing as "an opening to all the different ways in which the thought of the world might be composed,"[102] and thus, in correspondence with her monistic materialism in which everything is in becoming.

A second characteristic of Butler's writing according to Nussbaum, which is also relevant to our discussion, is the relation between very difficult and almost incomprehensible argumentation, and intellectual profoundness. Similarly to Foucault, who explained that incomprehensibility equals intellectual grandiosity in France, Butler

> "bullies the reader into granting that, since one cannot figure out what is going on, there must be something significant going on, some complexity of thought, where in reality there are often familiar or even shopworn notions, addressed too simply and too causally to add new dimension of understanding."[103]

Moreover, since it is not exactly clear 'what is going on', the exact meaning of what is written remains unclear and open to various interpretations. And exactly the fact that one can interpret some of these materialist texts in different ways explains for me the popularity of them (there's always something for you to be found in them), and more worrisome, the ability of these authors to argue that your interpretation is wrong, and you misunderstood them. This style of argumentation is described by Linda Zerilli as one in which the emphasis does not lie in putting forward truth-claims, but one in which the invention of 'figures of the thinkable' is pivotal.[104] These figures function as speculative attempts of inventing new ways of looking at the world which stimulate changes in our social-political structures. For some of these inventors of new discourses, these figures and symbols are the only and preferred form of resistance against injustices left.[105] The claim that new materialist theory should be understood as figures of the thinkable, is supported by the argument that thinking is a material activity, which implies that inventing (political relevant) discourse is a practical (politically relevant) activity. Put

100 Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 8, 173; Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 171. See also: Rosi Braidotti, "The Untimely," in *The Subject of Rosi Braidotti: Politics and Concepts*, ed. Bolette Blaagaard and Iris van der Tuin (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 228.

101 Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 20.

102 Claire Colebrook, "Disaster Feminism," in *The Subject of Rosi Braidotti: Politics and Concepts*, ed. Iris van der Tuin and Bolette Blaagaard (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 75. See also Rosi Braidotti, "Aspirations of a Posthumanist" (Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Yale University, January 5, 2016), pt. 8:55, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNIYOKfRQks. In the lecture, Braidotti explains that her attempt to do 'extraordinary things' necessitates the usage of 'specialized language', and should not be dismissed as 'jargon'.

103 Martha C. Nussbaum, "Professor of Parody: The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler," *New Republic*, February 1999.

104 As cited in: Bonnie Washick et al., "Politics That Matter: Thinking about Power and Justice with the New Materialists," Contemporary Political Theory 14, no. 1 (2015): 65. Originally, Zerilli presented her argument here: Linda M. G. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

105 Nussbaum, "Professor of Parody: The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler"; Clare Hemmings, "On Reading Transpositions: A Response to Rosi Braidotti's Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics," Subjectivity 3, no. 2 (July 1, 2010): 137.

differently, the performative character of discourse justifies the usage of discourse as a means towards ethical-political ends.[106]

In the next section I elaborate on the specific meta-ethical mechanism at work in the new materialists' 'figures of the thinkable', and evaluate whether these are to be chosen over other ways of dealing with injustices.

3.2 Attitudes and Ontologies

In this section, we take a better look at the ethical attitudes proposed by our authors. What's the value of inventing new discourses and figures of the thinkable that motivate certain dispositions, rather than thinking about real, actual politics? Are sketches of attitudes really to be preferred over the implementation of policies aimed at the protection of those in need? These questions relate to a broader discussion among those who are inclined to interpret these problems solely in terms of rights and obligations, and those who emphasize the importance of fostering extra-juridical modes of political inclusion, or attitudes.[107] In a similar vein, our new materialists argue that moral rules and rights are not sufficient when thinking about justice, and sometimes even detrimental to it. Instead, they put forward various attitudes that subjects should adopt when being in the world. Bennett was the most elaborate in this respect and in contrast to Barad and Braidotti, also explicitly justified her methodology by explaining why we should think in terms of attitudes and moods in the first place. Because she is the only author we discussed who explicitly does that, I limit myself in this section by only looking at her (older) work. I start by summarizing Bennett's meta-ethical position, then explain its 'weak ontological' character, and argue that it is valuable to understand new materialists arguments as instances of weak ontology. The aim of this chapter is to explain how a new materialist account of the world can be politically relevant due to its performative and imaginative character.

3.2.1 Bennett's figure of the thinkable

As you might recall, Bennett argues that before one can act ethically, one should first cultivate a certain mood or attitude. Though she is not very elaborate on this point in her *Vibrant Matter*, she spend an entire chapter on the topic in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*. According to her, ethics consists of both a moral code and an 'embodied sensibility'.[108] Learning a specific argument about how to live, does not necessarily lead people to actively engage in related activities but requires the cultivation of certain attitudes or dispositions. The meta-ethical problems Bennett touches upon are not new; in her book, she discusses three other thinkers who dealt with them before. Whereas the first theorist, Immanuel Kant, tried to safeguard the realm of morality from that of somatic moods and enchantments, Friedrich Schiller (number two) focused more, and possibly a bit too much, on the aesthetic character of ethical action. Michel Foucault, the third author, emphasized the difficulties of transforming moral rules into ethical behavior. It is not exactly clear what Bennett's own position in this matter is, and thus, what she thinks about the relationship between ethical action and the development of ethical attitudes.[109] But regardless of the specific answer to that question, for now it is important to note that she thinks that a set of moral principles is not enough to convince others to act differently. Next to a moral theory, the theorist also needs to stimulate the cultivation of the relevant dispositions and attitudes of her audience.

106 See also a paper written by Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin in which they explain that the new materialist movement understands writing as ontological, and therefore politically relevant activity: Dolphijn and Van der Tuin, "Pushing Dualism to an Extreme," 388, 395.

107 See for instance: James Tully, Public Philosophy in a New Key. Volume II: Imperialism and Civic Freedom. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), chap. 9; Stephan K. White, The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

108 Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*, 131.

109 Patchen Markell, "The Art of the Possible," *Political Theory* 31, no. 3 (2003): 461–70.

These attitudes are a necessary part of living the ethical life, or in other words, the act of bringing ethical principles into practice. But if it is true that a moral code needs to be supplemented by an 'enchanting' aesthetic part, the latter might "pollute it with the arbitrariness of taste."[110] According to Bennett, this dangerous pollution of the moral theory can take three forms. In the first place there is the danger that one's ethics is being captured by one's aesthetics.[111] How can one be sure that the sentiments and bodily affects generated by the images presented, will increase the persuasiveness of one's ethical theory? The second danger is that of the privatization of the ethical theory due to the fact that only a small number of people are inclined, and have the ability, to transform their dispositions according to the requirements of the ethical theory.[112] How can such proposals written for a small number of people be really meant to change the political culture, which is by definition dependent on a collective? The third and final problem envisaged by Bennett is the exact opposite: focusing on moods and dispositions is undesirable because politics should not meddle with the affairs of individual citizens.

The last two questions deal with the scope of a new materialist ethics: does it only pertain to the educated elite, or is also possible to reach out to a large political collective? Though Bennett does not take a clear stance on this in her book, in a response to two critics, she explains that framing the problem in terms of individuals or collectives ignores a third way of understanding social-political reality, which is in terms of assemblages.[113] For Bennett, and also for Barad and Braidotti, one should understand social-political relationships in terms of the networks of which they are part. Stating the problem therefore solely in terms of individuals *or* collectives amounts to presenting it in a false dilemma: these categories do not exist as such in the new materialists' ontological picture of the world. Regarding question one, which also came up in Washink and Wingrove's critical evaluation, Bennett acknowledges that her argument does not directly explain nor justifies how one should act.[114] There is, as I also explained above, no direct argumentative link between ontology and ethics. Even though the exact relationship between the two remains a bit vague, the important point I take from Bennett is that her materialist accounts is neither a perfect description of how the world functions, nor a straightforward collection of ethical maxims which help us leading a good life. Or, as Bennett wrote herself:

> "I read them [works of new materialism] instead as participating in a mode of theorizing whose key (albeit not exclusive) target is the *rhythm* of a problematic assemblage. My aim in *Vibrant Matter* (…) was to alter the perceptual field – the style of sensing and feeling and thus also thinking – of the humans participating in the assemblage."[115]

Moreover, a good way to understand this specific mode of theorizing is by describing it as 'weak ontology'. Bennett draws here from the work of Stephen K. White who characterizes the weak ontologist as someone who acknowledges the fact that theory needs to include a story about how notions of subjectivity, self, and the world are constituted and related.[116] Strong ontologists, by contrast, present their views on the world as incontestable truths. I think that understanding new materialists arguments as weak ontologies introduces an interesting way in which we can understand the truth-value of their theories, and can help us focus on what I believe their implicit aim is, that of proposing new

110 Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*, 148.
111 Ibid.
112 Ibid., 150.
113 Washick et al., "Politics That Matter: Thinking about Power and Justice with the New Materialists," 85.
114 Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*, 148; Washick et al., "Politics That Matter: Thinking about Power and Justice with the New Materialists," 83.
115 Washick et al., "Politics That Matter: Thinking about Power and Justice with the New Materialists," 83.
116 Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*, 160–61.

and different ways of seeing the world. In the next section we take a closer look at White's weak ontologies, and in 3.3.3. I will elaborate on the relation of weak ontology and truth.

3.2.2 White's weak ontology

In a similar way as Benhabib—who criticized the notion of the generalized other—, White also thinks that a specific conception of the modern subject has become untenable.[117] From different directions this modern or generalized subject is being criticized and White wants to form a better understanding of this critique. The distinction he draws between weak and strong ontology is helpful here. Strong ontologies are theories which explain what the world *is* and often also derive moral-political truths from these descriptions.[118] They, in other words, present an ontological foundation to how we think the world works and how we think we should therefore act. Weak ontologies, by contrast, are more modest working-hypothesis about the relationship of human beings and their environment, and are less inclined to derive ethical guidelines from them. Producers of weak ontologies are conscious of the fact that the specific interpretation of their theories largely depends on the context in which they are being read.[119] They, in other words, do not aim at arriving at a definitive truth, but merely want to communicate a certain aesthetic-affective disposition which needs to be cultivated by the reader herself.[120] In a review of White's work, Mark E. Warren explains that the important problem to be found in strong ontology—which is not to be found in its weaker variant—is its reduction of existence to judgments made by the mind.[121] Producers of strong ontological worldviews mistakenly assume that they can describe social-political reality in the absence of their own historical situatedness and fellow human beings. In their afterword in a special issue on White's proposal, Dilip Gaonkar and Keith Topper summarize the most important characteristics of weak ontology as

> "the acceptance of the idea that all fundamental conceptualizations of self, other and world are contestable and the sense that such conceptualizations are nevertheless necessary or unavoidable for an adequate reflective ethical and political life."[122]

White is aware that some readers might consider his proposal unnecessary complicated and confusing.[123] Isn't it easier to simply dismiss strong ontological theories on the basis of their inability and unwillingness to sufficiently reflect upon the fundamental concepts on which they are build? Why does one need a concept of weak ontology to help us understand the problems of strong ontology? According to White, whether one thinks the idea of weak ontology is valuable depends on whether one thinks that it "help[s] us think more creatively about the tasks of contemporary moral and political

117 Stephen K. White, "Weak Ontology and Liberal Political Reflection," *Political Theory* 25, no. 4 (1997): 503.

118 Ibid., 505; Stephen K. White, "Affirmation and Weak Ontology in Political Theory: Some Rules and Doubts," *Theory & Event* 4, no. 2 (2000).

119 White, "Weak Ontology and Liberal Political Reflection," 506. For strong ontologies, the context in which they are being read is less relevant.

120 White, "Affirmation and Weak Ontology in Political Theory: Some Rules and Doubts"; White, "Weak Ontology and Liberal Political Reflection," 507; Stephen K. White, "Violence, Weak Ontology, and Late-Modernity," *Political Theory* 37, no. 6 (2009): 812; Stephen K. White, "Weak Ontology: Genealogy and Critical Issues," *The Hedgehog Review* 7, no. 2 (2005): 17.

121 Mark Warren, "Comments on Stephen White, Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory," *Theory & Event* 4, no. 2 (2000).

122 Gaonkar and Topper partly quote White himself here. See: Dilip Gaonkar and Keith Topper, "Afterword: Notes on the Bearable Lightness of Being," *The Hedgehog Review* 7, no. 2 (2005): 96.

123 White, "Weak Ontology and Liberal Political Reflection," 521, footnote 11. See also: Stephen K. White, Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 8, 14-17.

theory."[124] I think White has a point here. Distinguishing between weak and strong ontology does not help us deciding in a clear and concise manner which theories are valuable or not, but does force us to reflect on the fundamental presuppositions at work in the concerned theories. For me, the value of weak ontology therefore lies in its application: only when applied when evaluating a theory does the somewhat vague theoretical conception of weak ontology receives its content, function and value. It is therefore no surprise that White's work on the concept consist for a large part on the application of the idea to theorists such as Carl Schmitt, William Connolly, Charles Taylor and Judith Butler.

Since the difference between weak and strong ontology is relative, it makes sense to imagine a continuum between very weak and very strong ontologies. I think that placing our new materialist projects on that imaginary continuum can help us understand their more general goal of transforming the way we look at the world. Bennett used a weak ontological method when she put forward a picture of the world wherein trash becomes alive and electricity networks can act.[125] The goal of her stories was to stimulate her readers to rethink their relationship with their environment. Her openness about her intention makes it for the reader easier to engage in a mental exercise of attributing liveliness to matter, and to imagine how the world would look like from that perspective. By contrast, Barad and Braidotti present a radically open universe where everything is in a constant process of transformation. For Barad, one's self is being constituted in constantly changing and self-constitutive processes called phenomena. For Braidotti, one ought to understand the world in terms of nomadic entities which strive for the increase of the intensity of the relationship they have with the Spinozean universe they inhabit. Everything is an everlasting 'becoming' and one can hardly talk about the *being* of individual components of the phenomena or monistic assemblages without falling into 'humanist', 'representationalist', or 'anthropocentrist' pitfalls. But in all its openness in a realm of endless possibilities, the Barad-Braidottian universe is pretty limited. There *is* not much to see out there. In my reading, the ontologies construed by Barad and Braidotti are stronger than Bennett's: in all their openness, their stories about how the world is, are relatively rigid, and there is not much room left for taking a stance towards them without completely ignoring their most fundamental principles. This is exemplified by the enormous difficulty of criticizing their positions: every counter-narrative is found to be part of intact dominant structures of thought.[126] Moreover, the posthumanist character of their stories ignores the fact that they have been written by human authors themselves. This lack of explicit attention to the situatedness of the theorists self overlooks the context in which those works were written, and the possible influence this has on the truth-value of their position.[127]

I think a weak ontological framework like that of Bennett is to be preferred to that of Barad's and Braidotti's because it takes the relationship between argument (vibrant materialism) and author (Bennett) into account. Even though it might be the case that the author herself is not completely responsible for the way the book came to be, there is no way in denying that there's someone like Jane Bennett with her own memories, intentions and what we normally call 'actions'.[128] In other words: even though many new materialists want to do away with modern conceptions of self, agency and

124 White, "Weak Ontology and Liberal Political Reflection," 521, footnote 11.

125 Though not unconditionally, Bennett accepted White's characterization. See: Jane Bennett, "Sometimes It's Okay to Be Weak: Reply to Stephen White," *Theory & Event* 4, no. 2 (2000). Bennett argues that several 'existential realities' White attributes to the subjects in weak ontological proposals are too humanistic.

126 Exemplary is the discussion between Dick Pels and Braidotti. See: Dick Pels, "Privileged Nomads: On the Strangeness of Intellectuals and the Intellectuality of Strangers," *Theory, Culture and Society* 16, no. 1 (1999): 63–86; Rosi Braidotti, "Response to Dick Pels," *Theory, Culture & Society* 16, no. 1 (1999): 87–93.

127 Chris Calvert-Minor, "Epistemological Misgivings of Karen Barad's 'Posthumanism,'" *Human Studies* 37, no. 1 (2014): 134; Henrietta L. Moore, "Living in Molecular Times," in *The Subject of Rosi Braidotti: Politics and Concepts*, ed. Iris van der Tuin and Bolette Blaagaard (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 53–54.

128 Krause, "Bodies in Action."

individuality, this does not mean that one should exclude the role of oneself when writing a new materialists account, and also, and especially, a justification for why *you* think *your* understanding of how the world works, is *the* way everyone should interpret their experiences.

But regardless of where we exactly place our three authors on the imaginative continuum between weaker and stronger ontologies, I hope to have shown that it makes sense to understand these new materialist arguments as attempts to change the way we think about our being-in-the-world by inviting us to *see* the world differently. And this focus on cultivating different dispositions, attitudes and moods is to be taken literary. Our authors really want us to rethink our bodily practices because they not only believe that this is necessary for the acceptance of certain ethical principles, but also because attitudes, moods or affects, might be a larger determinant for social-political change than an intellectual exchange of abstract arguments. In the next section (3.3), I elaborate on this claim and explain the democratic relevance of writing weak ontology.

3.3 Layer-cakes, blind spots and truth

I explained that our authors are part of a 'material turn' in feminist political theory wherein attempts are made to convince the reader to see matter and the world differently. It is interesting that their focus on matter also involves an emphasis on attitudes, dispositions and affects. Next to being part of a material turn, one can therefore also describe the work they do as being part of an 'affective turn'.[129] This affective turn is characterized by a strong emphasis on non-cognitivist forms of understanding and knowledge. In this section I explain how one should conceptualize these forms of knowledge. As I show, there is a distinction to be made between 'interpreting' and 'seeing' which relates (but is not equal) to the distinction made by Bennett between a moral code and attitudes or dispositions, as necessary requirements for ethical actions. We, in other words, further explore the distinction between what one can call 'reason' and 'affect' which is central to these weak ontological projects. What's the relevance of such an exploration? As already hinted on by Bennett, it turns out that the manner people *see* the world, greatly depends on the social-political context they live in. A thorough understanding of the way new materialists try to affect the attitudes of their readers, therefore directly relates to what might be described as what Rancière once called the 'distribution of the sensible', or:

> "[…] the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it."[130]

Or, in social psychological language: the implicit bias a collective has in favor of certain entities. This section deals with the worries expressed by Bennett about the polluting influence of affects on moral theory. Her first worry had to do with the relationship between affect and moral reasoning: how can we make sure that our moral reasoning isn't simply a form of uttering our subjective matters of taste? Her second and third worries related to the relationship between individual affects and political collectives. What's the ethical-political relevance of affects in the first place, and what to do with the 'elitists' character of being able to cultivate such attitudes? In sum: in this section I show how weak ontologies, including our new materialist proposals, can be morally and politically relevant. I end with a short elaboration on new materialism's relationship to truth.

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129 Joan C. Tronto, "Affected Politics," *Political Theory* 39, no. 6 (2011): 793–801; Linda M. G. Zerilli, "The Turn to Affect and the Problem of Judgment," *New Literary History* 46, no. 2 (2015): 261–286; Michael Feola, "Fear and Loathing in Democratic Times: Affect, Citizenship and Agency," *Political Studies* 64, no. 1s (2016): 53–69.

130 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 12.

3.3.1 Interpreting and seeing

According to Linda Zerilli, an 'affective turn' is taking place in contemporary feminist theory.[131] Authors who are part of this turn criticize the rationalist or cognitivist tendencies in political theory. Exemplary is the work of Kant who placed huge trust in the capacity of human beings to find out what to do through processes of 'monological' reasoning. Whereas scholars such as Jürgen Habermas and Benhabib criticized the monological character of his work before, feminist theorists drew attention to the 'irrational' or affective parts of our being-in-the-world, and showed that these aspects of our existence are also important, and sometimes even determinant to our behavior.[132] Zerilli is one of these scholars and in one of her papers tries to do two things: she shows that practical, embodied types of knowledge can have a conceptual or intentional character.[133] The reason for doing that is to safeguard the realm of affects from the polluting dangers we previously encountered in Bennett's argument: how to make sure that a moral theory wherein affects are taken seriously, doesn't slide into a form of emotivism where affect-informed judgments are merely matters of taste, and do not communicate anything intelligible? Her second goal is to convince the reader of the moral relevance of this affective form of knowledge.[134] What's the place or function of affects when making normative judgments?

To answer these questions, Zerilli firstly draws from Gilbert Ryle to distinguish between two ways of 'knowing'. On the one hand, there is 'knowing how', which has to do with all sorts of learned embodied dispositions. On the other there is 'knowing that', which can be described as the acquisition of certain propositions.[135] She explicates the relationship between those two forms of knowledge with help of the metaphor of the 'layer-cake'. In this cake our propositional intentionality (knowing that) rests upon a lower layer of cake made from our practical attunement to our environment (knowing how).[136] This hierarchical picture of the relationship between reason and affect is meant to convey that affects should be seen as determinate for the way we reflect upon our actions and construe knowledge about the world. But within phenomenology and the affect theory literature, this lower level of cake is often considered to be nonconceptual and nonintentional. If this is true and affects determine the way we not only experience but also judge the world, the layer-cake model is susceptible to the emotivists' worry that moral judgments are merely a matter of personal taste, which completely dispels the ethical-political relevance of affects. Zerilli thinks the problem can be solved with help from Wittgenstein's distinction between 'seeing' and 'interpreting'. For Wittgenstein, interpreting refers to the act of making inferences and the drawing of conclusions. Seeing, by contrast, is the act of immediately grasping objects appearing to us. Zerilli explains that seeing for Wittgenstein is an activity where someone tries to make sense of her experiences by categorizing them, precisely with the help of concepts.[137] Consider the famous example Wittgenstein uses of a drawing which can be both a duck or a rabbit.[138] Without reasoning, one sometimes sees the duck, and at other moments the rabbit. Zerilli writes that if "I *now* see the picture as a rabbit [this] reveals that I *had* been seeing it as a duck all along, that is, according to a concept."[139] According to Zerilli, this indicates the *im*possibility of *not* using concepts when being-in-the-world, which opens up the possibility of reflection upon the lower levels of the cake, and if necessary, the attempt to change the way we see the picture. We, in other

131 Zerilli, "The Turn to Affect and the Problem of Judgment."
132 Linda M. G. Zerilli, "Doing without Knowing: Feminism's Politics of the Ordinary," *Political Theory* 26, no. 4 (1998): 435.
133 Zerilli, "The Turn to Affect and the Problem of Judgment," 276–77.
134 Ibid., 278.
135 Ibid., 263.
136 Ibid., 267–68.
137 Ibid., 273–74.
138 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Filosofische onderzoekingen*, trans. Hans W. Bakx (Meppel: Boom, 1976), 258.
139 Zerilli, "The Turn to Affect and the Problem of Judgment," 274.

words, can do something about our affects, and thereby thus avoid the emotivists' worry. The fact that it is possible to do something about the contents of the foundation of our cake tells us something else: moral judgments are not completely detached from out attitudes and affects, and rests upon a layer of the latter.[140]

Zerilli's discussion of the affective turn and her proposal for understanding the relationship between rational argumentation and its affective foundation, support Bennett's argument about the importance of both a moral code, and an embodied sensibility to this code. When doing political theory, you not only need to be aware of the logical coherency of the moral arguments you present, but also think about the form in which you present your argument because that influences the way your reader *sees* your argument. Secondly, Zerilli's layer-cake model justifies the weak ontological model where the author aims at changing the attitudes and dispositions of his readers.

3.3.2 Democratic blind spots

Apparently, attitudes, affects and moods are morally relevant. But why does this matter and how does this relate to our story about new materialism? In this section I draw attention to the phenomenon of 'moral blind spots'. Moral blind spots are "ineluctable limitations and partialities that are folded into our moral knowledge or beliefs" which determine how we see the world or form a particular belief about it.[141] We are usually not aware of these blind spots, which are to be traced back to the social-historical contexts in which we grew up, studied, or worked. For Mark E. Button, the problem of moral blind spots is not that we have them—it is hard to image a life without—, but the 'second order problem' of being blind to your own moral blindness. In the words of Button, this second order problem amounts to:

> "forms of conduct and belief that deny (or actively strive to forget, cover, or avoid) the constitutive partialities, particular attachments, and social conditions of moral knowledge that shape and constrain ethical and political relationships with others."[142]

Drawing from social and cognitive psychology, Button explains that moral blind spots and the inability or unwillingness to acknowledge them have serious social-political consequences. In different ways, people are biased in their beliefs about how the world looks, and are prone to evaluate the perspectives of others more negatively than their own beliefs. These various ways of prioritizing your own worldview above that of others makes people less trustful of, and sometimes even hostile to others.[143] In other words, the way your moral blind spots determine what you exactly experience not only has consequences for the individual itself, but also influences the way individuals (and thus also groups) see and treat each other.

How to deal with our inclination to be blind about our own limitations? Button thinks the answer to this question lies in an institutionalized supported 'pathos of distance'.[144] The aim of this pathos is to slow down the inclination to evaluate others purely on the basis of your learned beliefs and to "facilitate a form of moral imagination and critical scrutiny on the self and the social-institutional sources of moral belief and sentiment."[145] One should imaginatively disentangle the different layers of Zerilli's cake and become conscious of not only the social-historical foundation onto which your

140 Ibid., 278.
141 Button, "Accounting for Blind Sports," 697.
142 Ibid., 696.
143 Ibid., 704.
144 Ibid., 712.
145 Ibid.

conventional beliefs are based, but also of the hierarchical order in which your beliefs and affects are structured. Though Button did not intend to give the reader a full-blown analysis of how such a pathos should be implemented in practice, the interesting thing about his proposal is that he thinks people should *institutionalize* practices which stimulate the critical reflection upon the relation between your self, your convictions, your time, your place, and so forth. Because blind spots are largely the result of living with others[146], a solution to collectively-induced worldviews and attitudes should also be looked for at the level of the collective. One can think in this context of institutions such as schools and the media, art forms such as music and the theater, or the study of the history of ideas (à la Skinner); a wide variety of cultural practices can be used to stimulate citizens to reflect on their selves and their moral values.[147]

For me, Button's proposal for the collective task of critically reflecting upon the way you understand the world is the final piece of the jigsaw puzzle showing the political relevance of our new materialists. I think that their emphasis on attitudes is important because it opens up new ways of looking at the world, which is in the light of the Zerilli's layer-cake and Button's blind spots, a very welcome and important contribution.

3.3.3 Beyond truth and falsehood

A generous reader might be willing to grant me the advantage I ascribed to new materialist theories: by writing weak ontology, new materialist theorists force their readers to reflect on the fundamental presuppositions underlying their theories, and simultaneously, on the conceptualizations of the subject and the world at work in more familiar moral political frameworks. Reflecting on the lower levels of the 'cake' that structures the character of our experiences is valuable because one becomes conscious of the unavoidable blind spots influencing the manner we deal with others living in our political communities. In short: the social-political relevance of new materialist theory lies in its capacity to stimulate a critical reflection on the conceptual apparatus with which we make sense of our experience, and an acknowledgment of the inevitability of this apparatus. But I left one problem untouched, namely the truth-value of these 'figures of the thinkable' or 'weak ontologies'. How can such unfamiliar, strange theories about the liveliness of things be true? In this section I elaborate on this problem and put forward one way of interpreting the epistemic value of new materialist theory.

Unfortunately, few new materialists explicitly deal with the truth-value of their own arguments. One promising approach to this question, by contrast, can be found in the work of Linda Zerilli. We met Zerilli before when she argued that some (feminist) scholars should be interpreted as presenters of so called 'figures of the thinkable'. I also explained that according to Zerilli, these figures did not aspire to be true or false. But what does that actually mean and what does that say about the truthfulness of new materialist theories? The structure of Zerilli's argument is similar to the one found in her previous comments about the hierarchical relationship between reason and affect. Firstly, Zerilli claims that the truth-value of a proposition depends on the "ungrounded ground of our practices" which are neither true, nor false.[148] Put differently, prior to the evaluation of the truth-value of a certain proposition, certain established epistemological conventions explain the rules governing the practice of evaluating itself. What kind of inferences are to be considered valid, and which ones are not? In a similar way as moral blind spots determine the specific way we interpret our experiences, dominant epistemic practices determine what we believe to be true or false. Secondly, figures of the thinkable highlight the

146 See also: Feola, "Fear and Loathing in Democratic Times," 56.
147 Button, "Accounting for Blind Sports," 713–14.
148 Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, 59.

contingent character of these epistemic practices.[149] When Braidotti introduces 'extraordinary language'[150] because she experiences the dominant discourse as too limiting, she, following Zerilli, attempts to interrupt or alter the epistemological system by introducing "figures that are not already given in sensible experience or the order of concepts."[151] Because these imaginative figures present new ways of dealing with the question of truth and falsity, they are also beyond the truth and falsity of the conventional epistemological practices, and hence, not to be evaluated by these standards.

If Zerilli is correct in arguing that certain forms of argumentation are not to be evaluated in terms of truth or falsehood, new materialists end up in a dilemma. On the one hand do they still want to criticize dominant moral and epistemological systems. On the other hand is it hard to regard their proposals as more than subjective interpretations of reality because they place themselves deliberately outside established practices.[152] We encountered the problem of taking a stance in this dilemma before when we evaluated Barad's dismissal of the distinction between ontology and ethics. I argued that Barad can be understood as a 'spoil-sport' ('spelbreker'). In contrast to the cheat who *pretends* to follow the rules of the game, the spoil-sport deliberately ruins it, by ignoring the rules, withdrawing from the game, and thereby "shattering" the play-community itself.[153] Sometimes, Huizinga writes, these spoil-sports form new, other communities, with new sets of rules governing the acceptability of practices, and definitions of truthfulness and falsity. In light of Huizinga's argument, it is no surprise that the value ascribed to figures of the thinkable according to Zerilli, lies in their ability to create new 'common worlds' where as many perspectives as possible are included and conceived of as politically relevant, and not merely as 'mere noise'.[154] The goal of these figures is to imaginatively extend concepts beyond their ordinary usage, to be able to foster an understanding of the relation we have with others, and our thrownness into a "world of objects and events whose causes and effects we neither predict nor control."[155]

The judgments made in these figures of the thinkable have an intersubjective character.[156] This means that the more a figure is capable of creating a public realm wherein people can develop the ability to see things differently, the more valuable it becomes.[157] These figures are a collective enterprise of constructing a story about how people relate, and each time such stories are being told, the rules governing the political community are changed, and new boundaries are set, waiting to be reevaluated in a new collective narrative.[158] Or, in Zerilli's words:

> "With time the forms and figures given by reflective judgment, too, become ossified as rules (that is, judgments that serve as principles of judgments) that themselves demand the response of imagination to break up the closure of rule-governed practices, unsettling their settled instantiation in a freedom-denying mode of common sense."[159]

Zerilli emphasizes the importance of stimulating the individual's ability to participate in the task of a lively political collective to collectively define itself. What are the rules that govern our interactions,

149 Ibid.
150 Braidotti, "Aspirations of a Posthumanist."
151 Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, 59, 143.
152 Ibid., 138, 157.
153 Huizinga, *Humo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, 11–12.
154 Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, 140, 147.
155 Ibid., 128.
156 Ibid., 134, 142.
157 Ibid., 139, 148, 151.
158 Ibid., 163.
159 Ibid.

and do these rules reflect the diverse and plural character of the community itself? It is important to note the active, practical character of this constant process of reflection and definition. It is, to give an example, not enough to grant rights to political participation to previously excluded groups. The validity and truthfulness of the political judgments made by our new materialists lies "in the activity of persuading rather than in the having been persuasive, in the taking part rather than in already being a part-taker."[160]

The value of new materialism lies, again, primarily in its attempt to reconfigure the basic practices of looking at the world that are dominant in a political community. Does that make it easier for us to evaluate their proposals, and answer the question about the truth-value of their proposals? If one wants to know whether these proposals are 'true' or 'false', one misunderstands the character of their work. If a clash occurs between a figure of thought and the dominant practices of a community, one should understand this figure as a "value that has not yet found expression in the sense of determinate concept"[161] rather than as something illogical, irrational or simply wrong.

3.4 Conclusions

In this chapter I explained that the best way in which one can understand new materialist argumentation is in terms of weak ontology. It is possible to evaluate and criticize the work of Bennett, Barad and Braidotti on their speculative character and dismiss their stories about the intelligence of matter as nonsense or bad writing, but I believe that one then misses the point these authors try to get across. Their speculations are meant to present different ways in which one can look upon the world and aim at at least two things. Firstly, to stimulate the reader to imagine what the world would look like from a different perspective. Secondly, to change the reader's disposition or attitude towards certain aspects of his or her life. These changes in attitude are morally and political relevant because of their relation to so called moral blind spots: the socially and historically acquired habits affecting our affects, and the manner we treat our fellow citizens.

4. Concluding remarks and points for discussion

In this thesis I discussed three authors writing in a relatively new tradition of contemporary feminist thought. Chapter one taught us that the world might be more complicated than we initially thought it was. All of our authors argue that we should understand our place in the world in terms of networks. Whether we like it or not, the bacteria on our skin and the food in our stomach has an influence on what kind of beings we are and what kind of beings we become. Similarly, when your television unexpectedly turns off it might be the case that you became part of large network connecting a wide range of different entities, all having to deal with the power shortage you experience. Chapter two focused on the ethical claims made by our materialists. If everything can be (or is) related, how does that influence the way we should act towards others? It appeared that Bennett, Barad and Braidotti tried very hard to avoid proposing any substantive moral judgments. New materialism is not about constructing moral theories, but about critically reflecting upon the way individual components of the material networks they describe relate to each other. This reflection does not result in moral codes, but solely in rough proposals for adopting certain attitudes. Exemplary are Bennett's 'anticipatory readiness', Barad's 'response-ability', and Braidotti's practice of 'dis-identification'.

This emphasis on the importance of cultivating dispositions is for me reason to argue that new materialism is not so much about reflecting upon how the world *is*, or proposing rules which explain how the world *should be*. By contrast, new materialists present 'figures of the thinkable', or creative

160 Karen Zivi, *Making Rights Claims: A Practice of Democratic Citizenship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 119. In her book Zivi elaborates on Zerilli's argument,

161 Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, 143.

attempts to let people rethink their relationship with specific parts of their environment. It is important to note that these 'weak ontologies' merely put forward an in-definitive working hypothesis that needs to be elaborated by the reader herself. The process where that happens involves ideally a reflection on the reader's basic beliefs about the world (the lower level of the cake), and a possible adjustment of them. The political relevance of the new materialist method is thus primarily of methodological, and secondarily of meta-ethical nature. In the first place, these texts make us wonder about the form in which their arguments are put and hopefully motivate us to reflect upon the way we ourselves communicate with others. Secondly, new materialist texts draw attention to the importance of affects for practicing ethics and doing politics. Though the specific relationship between affects and propositional knowledge remained a bit vague, the weak ontological character of these arguments necessitates a thorough reflection upon the way people act ethically, and the role of affects in their acting.

I left four difficulties laying beyond the scope of this thesis unresolved. In the first place is there the question of the justification of certain attitudes or dispositions. When new materialists argue for the importance of accepting and embodying certain dispositions, it is not always clear why these specific attitudes are chosen over others. Should we adopt Bennett's 'receptiveness', Barad's response-ability, or Braidotti's *amor fati*?[162] Even though new materialists often refuse to engage in devising moral norms and systems, giving reasons for favoring one attitude over others demands justification. The importance of justification relates to the second unresolved difficulty in the new materialists literature. If it is true that new materialists attempt to uncover and restructure dominant moral and scientific thought-systems, one needs to have a clear grasp and understanding of the character of this supposed dominant layer of cake. Is it, for instance, true that science in general is as humanist and anthropocentric as our authors believe it to be? Put differently, what are the new materialists actually criticizing and to what extend do they give a fair representation of the existing literature and practices? Related to this question is another one about the blind spots which our new materialists inadvertently introduce, and if accepted by enough people, become ossified. Zerilli explained that it is inevitable that the forms and figures invented by the new materialists, when accepted, will eventually replace the blind spots they wanted to get rid off. How do new materialist conceive of this prospect and are there ways of mitigating the effects of this ossification of rules? The last difficulty is the one introduced in the section about the truth-fullness of new materialist proposals. How to conceptualize and deal with attempts to reconfigure a dominant system, without thereby using concepts to be found in that system? One example of this is Huizinga's spoil-sport who explicitly denies the authority of the rules of the game, and therefore places himself out of the community of players. One promising route could be to focus on the activity of spoil-sporting itself, rather than trying to find an overarching theory with which one can explain the clash of the game and the spoil-sporter. I hope I can answer these questions in the future.

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162 Other examples are White's emphasis on a 'presumptive generosity' (White, *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen*.) and Button's 'pathos of distance'. See Barnett and Feola for critical discussion of this affective turn: Barnett, "Political Affects in Public Space"; Feola, "Fear and Loathing in Democratic Times."

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