

Beyond Human Subjectivity and Back to the Things Themselves: Jane Bennett's Vibrant Matter

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A review of Bennett, J. (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Introduction

Jane Bennett's (2010) *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things* (176 pages, published by Duke University Press) offers a unique counterpoint to much of the work contained in this special issue of *Phenomenology & Practice* dedicated to the study of things. Like the other articles herein, Bennett takes up the challenge of trying to understand things in their own-ness and recognize their unique being the world. But unlike most of the other articles, Bennett's text takes an overtly anti-phenomenological stance. Indeed, she considers phenomenology inherently problematic for understanding things due to its reliance on human subjectivity. Invoking Adorno's critique of Heidegger, Bennett writes, "the thing is always already humanized" (p. 18), which makes us unable to conceive of the thing as anything other than an object. According to Bennett, this ultimately supports an instrumentalist worldview. For many phenomenologists—including myself—Bennett's claim will appear both a serious and overly simplistic charge. And, admittedly, *Vibrant Matter* is meant to be adversarial. Bennett is challenging her readers to abandon their human-centric worldview, specifically where we conceive of there being inanimate matter (things) and animated life (us) (a binary view that she posits is the dominant way of approaching our world), and asks us to understand things—and, ultimately, also ourselves—as complex "vibrant" materials constantly interacting with one another in not fully determinate ways. At root, this latter position is Bennett's theory of *vital materialism*, a theory she suggests will promote more responsible, ethical human engagement with our world and ensure the long-term survival of the planet.

For some, Bennett's work will appear revolutionary, while for others it will seem a retreading of long-familiar territory (other reviews of *Vibrant Matter* attest to this range of perceptions). Though she eschews it, scholars familiar with recent phenomenological and post-phenomenological writing will find little new in Bennett's description of the independence and quasi-agency of things or of the human attitude she believes is necessary to its revelation. Even still, the breadth of scholarship that Bennett invokes in her discussion and the examples she explores offer several intriguing insights, making *Vibrant Matter* an interesting, if occasionally

problematic and not wholly necessary, text for the study of things.

About Jane Bennett

To understand the positioning of *Vibrant Matter* as both a philosophical and political project, it may be helpful to first position the text amongst Bennett's other scholarly writing. A professor of political science at Johns Hopkins University, Bennett has extensively written about materiality, specifically from the perspective of eco-philosophy and political ecology, her two areas of focus. This book follows the "ethical turn" of recent political theory, and can be considered both ecological philosophy and a political ecological theory.

Bennett's fourth sole-authored book, *Vibrant Matter* may be considered the culmination (to date) of her thinking on the intersection of ethics, aesthetics, morality, politics, and things as the independent beings. For those familiar with her oeuvre, *Vibrant Matter* should be considered a companion piece to her second book, *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (2001), which explores the relation between human affect, aesthetics, and ethics. Bennett (2010) explains:

The figure of enchantment points in two directions: the first toward the humans who feel enchanted and whose agentic capacities may be thereby strengthened, and the second toward the agency of the things that *produce* (helpful, harmful) effects in human and other bodies. (p. xii)

Whereas *The Enchantment of Modern Life* concerns the former and takes as its central positioning the human experience, *Vibrant Matter* seeks to escape the human and understand things in their own-ness by focusing on the latter, examining that which sparks human imagination and response: the agency of things, themselves.

Synopsis

Vibrant Matter begins with the claim that our current human tendency to view the things of our world as "intrinsically inanimate matter may be one of the impediments to the emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption" (ix). A paradigm shift is required: we must cease to view the things of our world as mute, brute matter, and instead recognize that all physical materials, including that which makes up the human body, has its own unique agentic capacity, trajectories, interactions, and potentialities outside of, and distinct from, *human* agency. Bennett points to the fact that we know that matter, even the most apparently inanimate, changes over time—whether incredibly fast or infinitesimally slow—and interacts with other materials. Plants grow, power moves along electrical lines, waste rots, and metals change (to highlight a few of her examples). Moreover and in contrast to the traditional mechanical view of the material world, the way in which things act and interact can never be fully pre-determined. Rather, material interactions sometimes have logical (but never fully identifiable) trajectories, while at other times they are entirely unexpected. For instance, a plant may grow, but we cannot definitively foresee which specific cells will divide and which ones will die, nor the specific manifestation of the plant's form, nor how the plant will be shaped by other materials and forces in its environment. What is conceived as chance in the mechanical

worldview is, for Bennett, the vibrant, impersonal quasi-agency inherent to all things and their distributive power when acting as assemblages. Quite simply, things act and groups of things act together. In contrast to past theorists who similarly proposed a vital force present in objects, the agency Bennett attributes to things is not conceived of as an animating life force such as a soul—something in addition to the existing inert stuff of the material body—but as a vitality inherent to materials' very physicality. Materiality and vitality are understood as one and the same. Bennett acknowledges that this type of agency can be difficult for humans to perceive, but states that it may not only be conceptually understood through argument but also directly glimpsed, if only momentarily, if we open ourselves to the possibility. To this end, Bennett includes many personal stories, events, and examples in the hopes of enabling in her readers such moments of insight.

Over eight chapters, Bennett slowly and, at times contradictorily, fleshes out her theory of vital materialism. Although drawing upon a range of philosophers, scholars, and theorists, both ancient and contemporary, as well as scientific studies, her theory relies largely upon Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory and key concepts from Deleuze and Guattari. In particular, vital materialism builds directly upon the notion of materials as *actants*, the interaction of objects as *assemblages*, and the force of their interaction as one of *distributive agency*.

In Chapter 1, "The Force of Things," Bennett develops the concepts of *thing-power* and *out-side*. *Thing-power* is the agency of material objects to act and impact other materials, thereby producing effects in the world. To understand materials' thing-power, we must recognize its *out-side*, that which belongs to a thing but escapes human understanding. To explain what is *out-side*, Bennett draws on De Vries' concept of the absolute, as well as Adorno's notion of non-identity. What is *out-side* is that which we may only indirectly perceive and yet know to exist. Bennett attempts to illustrate both *thing-power* and *out-side* through a personal story of seeing—really seeing—garbage in a gutter and Kafka's short-story, "Cares of a Family Man," which tells of an animated spool of thread called Odradek. In both, the strangeness of the thing is momentarily perceived, yet cannot be articulated. It exists as a thing—a thing in and of itself—in the world. Bennett readily acknowledges the difficulty of putting into language these glimpses. She also acknowledges that experiencing them will be, in part, by chance, but also in part due to "a certain anticipatory readiness" or willingness to see on our part; what she calls "my in-side" (p.5).

Chapter 2, "The Agency of Assemblages," explores the 2003 blackout (a loss of power impacting more than 50 million people across eight American states and one Canadian province) in order to develop the understanding of both material agency and the concept of assemblages. According to Bennett, the agency of things is difficult to theorize because it unlike human agency. Instead, she likens it to the Chinese concept of *shi* (more commonly known as *chi*). Bennett describes both the structural conditions that led to the blackout but also the strange way in which the electricity, itself, was moving at that time. It was, she argues, an exemplar of the material agency of an assemblage of things: the event occurred due to the failure of the complex infrastructure that was operating, combined with the unique physical features of how electricity can act under certain conditions. Bennett then adds to the assemblage a discussion of the corporate decision-making and government policy that further contributed to the black-out thus introducing the notion of a human-nonhuman assemblage.

In Chapter 3, "Edible Matter," Bennett takes up the question of food and explores how human beings are not entirely self-contained, but consist of materials that are of oneself and of not-onself both within our bodies (food, bacteria) and outside of our bodies (bacteria, our physical environment, etc.). This chapter is key to moving the reader from thinking about

themselves in relation to material things to thinking of themselves as material things physically tied in and through the world. Bennett explicitly explores how food can impact us, including our mood and our cravings. We become what we eat, and yet food also remains distinct from us as it becomes waste. Moving from the individual to the social and political, then Bennett contrasts the slow food movement with McDonalidization, challenging the reader to see the assemblage of materials in which food is operant and to see one's self as part of that assemblage both acting within it and being acted upon by the assemblage's other components.

In Chapter 4, "A Life of Metal," Bennett invokes Aeschylus' myth of the adamantine chains that bound Prometheus (chains that could never be broken) and explores the actual scientific composition of metal, which proves to be constantly, albeit very slowly, and always changing. For Bennett, the changing life of metal suggests that we should not view the world as containing animating forces, but rather see all objects as being "a life"—that is, being vital material inherently capable of acting.

Chapter 5, "Neither Mechanism nor Vitalism," engages three scholars who have attempted to likewise articulate materials' "vital force": Kant and his concept of *Bildungstrieb*, Driesch and the notion of *entelechy*, and Bergson and his idea of *élan vital*. Each helps—through point or counterpoint—to further develop Bennett's theory of vital materialism, while simultaneously clarifying for the reader how her new materialism aligns and diverges from previous theories. Chapter 6, "Stems Cells and the Culture of Life," builds directly on Chapter 5 by exploring how particular views of materials as active can be politicized. Specifically, Bennett explores how the evangelical "culture of life" views life as existing in embryonic stem cells while simultaneously valuing war and death as means of preserving the American way of life. She uses this as a cautionary tale and tries to move the discussion of stem cells away from them being inherently "life holding" to an understanding of stem cells having a "pluripotentiality," that is, as having a potentiality that is brought into being through their extraction and the way in which they subsequently begin to interact in the petri dish environment.

In Chapter 7, "Political Ecologies," Bennett directly links the philosophy of vital materialism to political theory and explores the example of Darwin's worms. She discusses two differing notions of democracy and the public in order to identify how vital materialism might allow us to reconceive politics as political ecology. Finally, in Chapter 8, "Vitality and Self-Interest," Bennett articulates the personal and collective self-interest of adopting a vital materialist perspective, identifying ways that this worldview may be developed, and articulating its implications for human beings relation to the world.

Critical Comments

While Bennett is proposing a theory of the agency of things that is not reliant on human subjectivity for its manifestation, it quickly becomes evident that she is doing so for a very human reasons. Indeed, Bennett's objectives are three-fold: methodologically, she wants to "develo[p] a vocabulary and syntax for, and thus a better discernment of, the active powers issuing from non-subjects" (p. ix); philosophically, Bennett wants to incarnate in her readers a deep understanding of the entire world (including ourselves) as living, vibrant, interacting, interconnected material beings; and, politically, she wishes to incite a more ethical and sustainable relation to our world or, as she describes it, to counter "human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption" (p. ix).

Methodologically speaking, Bennett does develop a strong approach for thinking about the agentic capacity of things. Latour, Deleuze, and Guattari give Bennett a sound foundation on which to build her theory. Invoking the familiar and relatively well-known Actor Network Theory (ANT), specifically, is likely the safest way in which Bennett could have articulated vital materialism; and, indeed, vital materialism never stretches far from ANT. Bennett's shortfall in developing her methodology, however, is her tendency to excessively cite scholars. The sheer number of philosophers, thinkers, and scholars that she continues to invoke long after her theory has been articulated suggests a lack of confidence in the ability of her ideas to stand-alone. Moreover, these citations occasionally end up detracting from, rather than adding to, the understanding she develops in each chapter.

Bennett, however, advances her theory using a two-fold approach: to argue and to show. And the latter is achieved through wonderfully illustrative examples. My favourite is her description of a dead rat in the gutter.

On a sunny Tuesday morning on 4 June in the grate over the storm drain to the Chesapeake Bay in front of Sam's Bagels on Cold Spring Lane in Baltimore, there was:

one large men's black plastic work glove
one dense mat of oak pollen
one unblemished dead rat
one white plastic bottle cap
one smooth stick of wood

Glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick. As I encountered these items, they shimmied back and forth between debris and thing... I was repelled by the dead (or was it merely sleeping?) rat and dismayed by the litter, but I also felt something else: a nameless awareness of the impossible singularity of that rat, that configuration of pollen, that otherwise utterly banal, mass-produced plastic water-bottle cap. (p. 4)

Even as I type this section, I am struck by the subtle move from numeration to contemplation to singularity; from the reporting of objective facts to an almost inarticulate pointing to in an attempt to capture an experience that escapes language. "*That... that... that...*" And I recognize in Bennett's description moments where I, too, have felt the strange twist of perception and become acutely aware of the absolutely utter uniqueness of a moment and that which stands before me; my own moments of *that*.

Through Bennett's descriptive writing, readers (and I suspect phenomenological readers in particular) begin to see how different things might show themselves in their vital materiality. Bennett likens this perspective to the way children experience their world with naivety and wonder. It is in these moments that Bennett's reasoned and excessively cited but largely abstract arguments become sound and resonant with experience. And I suspect phenomenological readers will find these the most interesting portions of the text since Bennett's technique of evoking in her readers a bodily recognition of things' strange living quality echoes something of our own practice of the heuristic reduction and our attention to "vocative" power of language (van Manen, 2014).

Indeed, much of what Bennett is trying to do will seem familiar to many phenomenological scholars. While her text is not a phenomenological text and she is admittedly

trying to avoid using phenomenology, Bennett's work shares many of the same goals as other phenomenological studies of things. Consider the various purposes that Bennett, herself, ascribes to her work. In addition to wanting to evoke a child-like wonder about the world (p. vii), she wants to reveal the strangeness of the things of the world that are often too familiar and "too close to see clearly" (p. 4); she desires to understand what makes things uniquely what they are; she wants to bring back to human awareness the living quality of things (p. 4); she wishes to move "from the language of epistemology to that of ontology" (p. 3); and she seeks to develop in her readers an attunement to, an appreciation for, and thoughtfulness about their own being in the world with material things (p. 4). All these purposes resonate with the contemporary phenomenology project (see: van Manen, 2014). Phenomenologists, moreover, will recognize in Bennett's description of human's material entwinement with the world similarities to Merleau-Ponty's (1968) notions of *chiasm* and *flesh*. They are also likely to find in Bennett's concern for our contemporary relationship with the world and the need to better understand technology traces of Heidegger's argument that modernity's technological enframing prevents human beings from encountering their world as anything other than "standing-reserve" (1977/2008). But whereas Heidegger views human beings relating to themselves as things as the terrible outcome of a full-fledged manifestation of our modern worldview, Bennett promotes recognizing our own thing-like-ness as the way in which we can escape that worldview. It is, therefore, somewhat odd that Bennett only engages Merleau-Ponty's and Heidegger's thinking in her notes and, even there, in only a limited manner. A deeper engagement with both would have added richness and complexity to her theory (although, that would have added yet another two scholars being cited).

Given its various resonances with phenomenology, *Vibrant Matter* will likely appeal to phenomenologists even as it poses an interesting challenge to them: how to achieve a deep rich understanding of the thinging of things without basing that understanding in human subjectivity? And herein lies one of greatest difficulties with *Vibrant Matter*: Bennett's treatment of subjectivity, or rather her lack thereof. At a surface level, it is difficult not to take issue with the audacity of an author who claims that we need to understand things as they exist and operate in the world without falling back on human experience to ground that meaning and understanding; but who does so by writing a book. It appears a contradiction and one that Bennett's acknowledges. She claims, however, to want to put subjectivity aside—"to bracket the question of the human" (p. ix) (again invoking a phenomenological practice)—in order to make space for the expression of vital material. She further insists that "what looks like a performative contradiction may well dissipate if one considers revisions in operative notions of matter, life, self, self-interest, will, and agency" (p. ix), suggesting that the contradiction of her work may be overcome by recognizing that human beings are also materials interacting in human-nonhuman assemblages. Unfortunately, this claim is inadequate because Bennett never addresses her theory re-conceives subjectivity, only agency. We may come to recognize the strangeness, impersonal power, and ultimate unknowability of the agency of things, and we may even begin to recognize in our own material agency something of things' quasi-agency, but we are still bound to our experience of the world and our reliance on language. And while we may have no doubt that the material world exists, is always changing, and is always interacting with other elements in the world—with or without humans' awareness—Bennett fails to address how this could be accessed in any way other than through human subjectivity. Nor does she address the potential shaping that subjectivity may have on our understanding. Even in those rare momentary glimpses of absolute otherness enabled by her examples, she and her readers are still human, suggesting that the glimpses of insight that Bennett so values may not be quite as subjectivity-free as she would like.

I recognize and accept Bennett's desire to move beyond how subjectivity commonly limits our understanding of things (that is, her desire to move from a binary to complex understanding). I find, however, that her failure to undertake any discussion of how subjectivity may be reconsidered in light of vital materialism to be a significant limitation of her work and one with serious ramifications. Indeed, human subjectivity seems to be central to, but entirely absent from, Bennett's transition of vital materialism from being a philosophical exercise to becoming a political movement and personal worldview. Bennett merely assumes that, having adopted a vital materialism perspective, human beings will encounter their world differently and, thereby, make more ethical, reasonable, and sustainable choices. But having failed to explore in any detail this shift in perception or how it translates into different actions, Bennett's claims to supporting a better way of life seem unfounded. Moreover, a few of her examples for moving toward more ethical living prove troubling when considered in detail.

As previously noted, Bennett proposes that we need to understand how both the things of the world and own bodies are matter, and as matter our materiality conglomerates and interacts with other matter in assemblages. And yet, if we do conceive of ourselves as materiality in assemblages, as interconnected intermingled actants, and accept a "less vertical plane" (p. ix) of values where all materiality, both human and non-human, becomes more equal, does that necessarily make me choose to consume less or buy more thoughtfully? Not necessarily—or, at very least, Bennett does not explain how. What she does claim is that many of our decisions as members of assemblage will be made with self-interest in mind, but with an expanded understanding of what constitutes both "self" and "interest." This she believe will lead to more ethical choice, yet never explores how this would happen.

I wonder, for instance, about buying locally grown produce, a practice promoted by the slow food movement, the movement that Bennett presents as the ethical alternative to fast food and McDonalized food production in Chapter 3. It seems to me that the choice to buy locally is driven not just by the physical qualities of the food or the local social and transactional system—that is, the assemblage in which produce, farmers, and I are a part—but also by some very human beliefs and values. These include beliefs like the belief that supporting local farmers is more valuable than supporting large agri-business, the belief that food at a local market is fresher and better to eat, or the belief that, by buying locally, I am being a more conscientious citizen than if I shop at a big box store. (Incidentally, these are beliefs that are not always grounded in fact). These very human beliefs drive actions that manifest as agency, but do these beliefs change when I adopt a vital materialist perspective? If I don't already believe them, will I adopt them when I adopt a vital materialist perspective? There is no indication of why I would. From a vital materialist perspective, it seems to be a matter of choosing to be part of a smaller assemblage with a local farmer or part of a larger assemblage with agri-business; a matter of size, rather than of values. There is a gap between Bennett's theory and its application. She never indicates how vital materialism suggests that the slow food movement is better or more ethical than fast food—although, by putting it forward as the "ethical alternative," Bennett reveals that she believes it to be the case.

Bennett's choice of what is "ethical" reveals an unspoken bias that becomes uncomfortable when scrutinized. The choices and the beliefs that drive the slow food movement (which businesses should be supported, what "healthy food" looks like, and what responsible citizenship is) are rooted in a very particular social and economic class: the upper-middle class. Moreover, slow food movement practices are largely economically and socially unsustainable for all but the relatively wealthy. Locally grown food is often more costly and requires more time to buy and prepare than other food—this is money and time that many, but especially the poor, do

not have. And yet, by putting the slow food movement forward as the ethical alternative assemblage to current food consumption patterns of most Americans—consumption patterns, I might note, that are exemplified most by the poor—Bennett seems to be perpetuating a long-standing class system whereby being poor = bad and being wealthier = good. At minimum, this example demonstrates an error in Bennett’s inductive reasoning and the inability to successfully move a philosophical idea into the political and social realms. At worst, it suggests that Bennett fails to recognize her own subjectivity and class privilege in defining what constitutes ethical alternatives to contemporary practices.

Even more concerning to me is where Bennett leads us in Chapter 7 as she considers how non-human things can have public and political impact. After considering the power of matter in light of Rancière’s proposition that political actors speak and generate an effect, and noting the trend for “democratic theory to be anthropocentric” (p. 107) and requiring actors have a linguistic ability, Bennett asks:

But what if we loosened the tie between participation and human language use, encountering the world as a swarm of vibrant materials entering and leaving agentic assemblages? We might then entertain a set of crazy and not-so-crazy questions: Did the typical American diet play any role in engendering the widespread susceptibility to the propaganda leading up to the invasion of Iraq? Do sand storms make a difference to the so-called sectarian violence? *Does mercury help enact autism?* (p. 107, emphasis added)

In a single short sentence, Bennett contributes to a myth that has led to preventable child deaths across North America. As the prevalence of immunization decreases because of autism fears, we are now facing outbreaks of diseases across the continent that, just 30 years ago, were rare. There is no scientific basis to claim a link between mercury and autism; it is a theory that has been tested and disproven many times over the years. And yet, by asking this question—even if acknowledging it might be a “crazy” question—Bennett suggests that the scientific basis against assuming a link is a matter of a human perspective rather than scientific fact. People familiar with the scientific research on autism and mercury will agree that this is not a question that any approach to democracy (even those that include the influential power of things) should entertain as potentially valid. That Bennett’s ideas posit equal footing for all material things as a mode of thinking does not excuse this irresponsible justification of a dangerous movement against vaccination or the disregard for the reality of human life, illness, and science-backed medicine that such suggestions support.

Both the example the slow food movement and Bennett’s willingness to reopen the mercury-autism debate point to a troubling aspect in *Vibrant Matter*: many of Bennett’s conclusions (i.e., that slow food is a viable alternative to fast food, and that the question of the link between mercury and autism becomes reasonable to ask in light of a vital materialist worldview) often seem slightly “off,” informed by personal belief rather than the practical political and social application of her theory of vibrant materialism. And readers should critically question her conclusions.

Bennett’s theory, however, is still interesting and it does make me want to seriously consider what it might mean if we accept that we are messy material beings intertwined with a messy material world wherein there is a greater equality of materiality (the “less vertical plane” (p. ix) of value). If we are all vibrant matter, human beings no longer necessarily hold supremacy over the physical world. Perhaps, then we should reconsider whether we have the right to exert

our will over other materials. Do we have the right to negatively impact other materials? While we might accept this when we think of animals or forest and seas—perhaps, as Bennett suggests, our individual choices will become more respectful of them—what about when we are considering disease-transmitting insects or viruses and bacteria? Should we still claim the right to snuff them out either individually or collectively? This is an uncomfortable question to consider in the light of the diseases we have tried to eradicate to preserve human health—diseases like polio, malaria, and zika—and it is a question that Bennett never nears.

The fact that I am entertaining this thought experiment, however, suggests that there is something valuable in the ideas Bennet's presents to us in *Vibrant Matter*; in the ways they make us think differently about things, the question they make us ask of ourselves, and the strange and sometimes terrible rabbit holes we are led down when we follow them to their conclusion. And perhaps, *Vibrant Matter*, is best considered just that: a fascinating thought experiment. It is by no means, however, what Bennett presents it to be: an unproblematic new worldview that will lead to a better, more hopeful future for ourselves and our planet.

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