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## For the Good of the Thing

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts  
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FOR THE GOOD OF THE THING

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Sarah Warren

Graduate Program in Theory & Criticism

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
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London, Ontario, Canada

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## Abstract

What is to be done about the thing? There is a growing interest in contemporary philosophy in re-considering the ontological status of the object – traditionally considered the passive substrate of human experience. This paper argues that, if we treat the object *qua* object seriously as an area of inquiry and attempt to accord it – *à la* Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* – a certain amount of agency, we can come to see it as both unique in its capacities and more than superficially enabling of subjective cognition. By using Jane Bennett’s aforementioned text, Clark and Chalmers’ extended mind theory, and phenomenological description borrowing from Merleau-Ponty, I argue that it is possible to formulate an intuitive and *livable* account of a vital matter that functions as memory and that, if adopted, could contribute much toward rectifying problematic attitudes about environmental awareness and thus practices.

## Keywords

vital materialism, extended mind theory, phenomenology, Jane Bennett, Andy Clark, David Chalmers, Merleau-Ponty, materialism, memory, ontology

## Acknowledgments

As with any scholarly undertaking, this thesis was built not only out of ideas lassoed and wrassled, but out of support from myriad sources: institutions, funding agencies, faculty, peers, family, and friends.

I would first like to thank the Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism and the University of Western Ontario, as well as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, for the financial support that afforded me the opportunity to pursue this research.

Special thanks goes out to my supervisor, Dr. Tim Blackmore, whose superhuman patience and unwavering faith in me were shadowed only by the generosity of his spirit. Dr. Blackmore's endless supply of tea and cookies, kind offers of help during times of personal trial, and idiosyncratic email signatures were every ounce as instrumental as his sage advice in compiling this document, and for this he has my heartfelt gratitude. Tim, you are my touchstone for benevolent scholarship, and I can offer no better compliment.

I would also be remiss in failing to thank several of my peers, who stood out as indefatigable allies during my time at Western. Ilya Merlin, for reminding me that *il y a magique* – for being an inspiration as a scholar, but also for the Bedtime Stories Initiative and late-night car rides (I know you have my back). Jaime Roman Brenes Reyes, for having the tender heart of a poet, and showing me how to wear it as a badge of honor. Siobhan Watters and Jessica Elaine Reilly, for being strong female scholars who understand the importance of political engagement in the academy.

To my family, who never quite understood what I do or why (or why I moved eight times over the course of my degree), but who unfailingly offered their support (and moving van) anyway, I can say only this: I'm sorry, and I love you. In this group I include (and will always include) Carmi Turchick, who has never been anything less than my staunchest advocate and an incredible sidekick. It was never just the foot massages. Canada is waiting for you any time you'd like to come back.

Many thanks to my partner Frédéric-Ismaël Banville for playing the roles of amateur psychologist, thesaurus, and sounding board throughout the writing process. Never mind the 13-hour Skype co-working sessions while he was a visiting scholar at the University of Pittsburgh because “you can't turn down the volume on non-virtual people.” Fred, I look forward to picking up the baton as you settle into writing your dissertation. *Je t'aime*.

Finally, and with so much emotion that words fail me, I would like to dedicate this thesis to Jess Grover, whose tenacity and bravery in the face of incredible hardship has moved me in ways that I cannot describe. You are one of the best (and most colorful) souls that I know. Although your struggles far outweighed my own, I am glad that we could at least struggle together – and I know we will struggle (and thrive) through so much more.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Epigraph.....	v
1 Introduction (What Could the Matter Be?).....	1
2 Vital Materialism: The Action of Materiality and the Materiality of Action .....	17
3 The “Hegemony of Skin and Skull”.....	36
4 “Incantative, Evocative Speaking”: Phenomenology, Memory, and the Power of the Object.....	54
5 Conclusion (Paging Epimetheus: From <i>Dyspraxia</i> to <i>Eupraxia</i> ) .....	71
Bibliography .....	84
Curriculum Vitae .....	89

*O irrevocable*

*river*

*of things:*

*no one can say*

*that I loved*

*only*

*fish,*

*or the plants of the jungle and the field,*

*that I loved*

*only*

*those things that leap and climb, desire, and survive.*

*It's not true:*

*many things conspired*

*to tell me the whole story.*

*Not only did they touch me,*

*or my hand touched them:*

*they were*

*so close*

*that they were a part*

*of my being,  
they were so alive with me  
that they lived half my life  
and will die half my death.*

– Pablo Neruda, *Odes to Common Things*

## 1 Introduction (What Could the Matter Be?)

Of all of the things that seem intuitive and immediate to us, the “thing” is a choice example – so choice, in fact, that it has just slipped into our language in the form of colloquial vernacular consciously unbeknownst to us, a surreptitious answer to an implicit question not yet posed in the form of *quod erat demonstrandum*. Each object manifests before our gaze as something apparently wholly given, readily accessible, and with no opaque shroud of mystery to interfere with our ability as subjects to engage with it for our private means. This is not to say that objects are *declarative* for us. Part of our common sense understanding of the object is its fundamental inertial quality – a characterizing passivity and reactivity that precludes the possibility of vocality and thus firmly entrenches the ontic in a domain cleanly divided from the ontological.

Furthermore, there is a way in which this absence of vocality is taken up by us, the subject, as a testament to the veneer of ineffability that adorns the object, lending it an air of reticence or even intractability that is at odds with the open transparency described above. However, this reticence or intractability is the same quality that spurs the spirit of natural investigation to which the object, with little protest, yields – a fact well-corroborated by the many-limbed and densely populated enterprise of scientific inquiry. Quiet though it may be, the object is generous in its offerings. In its natural state as something ready-to-hand, it is always an answer and never a question; it is never *expressively* complex, only materially (compositionally) so.

Yet the subject/object dichotomy is of an old and rich vintage, loathe to stay out of the spotlight for long, and making appearances across a vast swathe of disciplines in a variety of both traditional and chimeric forms. Speculative realism and its subset of object-oriented ontology are merely some of the more recent, explicit, and philosophically-gearred of these appearances. The liminal space between subject and object has a large measure of affective and intellectual grip, and echoes of this concern float across the scholarly landscape as a persistent and pervasive existential fugue. A great deal of the “meat” of this particular dichotomy comes from contestation around what it is that constitutes the fundamental difference(s) between the subject and the object – how we

can rest assured, at the end of the day, that there is some kind of quiddity amongst subjects that makes us radically other than objects. Philosophers tend to refer to this intersection – or, rather, the shifting sands that underlie its marker of differentiation, and the inferences that can be made as a consequence of this shifting – as the “subject-object problem.” While formulations of this relationship vary widely, our interactions with our environment as a species attest to the fact that we long for the object to show its face as a form of absolute alterity. Not only does such an act provide us with a foothold in the process of (self-)identity construction, but it also undergirds a larger narrative that can be exploited systematically to suit the whims of social, political, and/or cultural needs – whether these needs be catered to in good or bad faith. We use matter for subsistence in the form of nourishment and shelter; we refine and re-constitute it through forms of aesthetic expression; we attribute it with meaning through the projection of individual experiences and values. All of these activities have a great deal of instrumental value for us. However, a note of caution may be warranted here, conveyed through an observation – the fact that the way that we talk about things not only carries semantic force, but a much stronger, more insidious, *constitutive* force of productive power, in a somewhat Foucauldian sense.<sup>1</sup> If we may borrow his observation that power subtends and suffuses all relations, how can the material body *in abstracto* escape it? And how can these material discourses be incised and re-appropriated for application to *social* bodies?

Such a view is seen by some as inherently anthropocentric and, accordingly, problematic. Deep ecologists, for example, see the natural world, which we will (given the breadth of our interest) view as the sum of objects or materiality outside of the direct manipulation of human projects, as worthy of moral consideration regardless of their influence on human values or needs. While this position does not typically forbid the human use of the natural world in order to satisfy the requirements of life, it sees these requirements of life

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1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1990), 92-96.

as just one set of needs on par with others in a biocentric ethical model.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of one's position on the relative merits of this breed of egalitarian environmental philosophy, which is admittedly fairly radical, it does introduce a valuable note of axiological humility into the picture. By treating our environment as more than a crust of reality for human appropriation, deep ecology invites a dialogue on not only what is important to us, but *why* it is important to us, and how the reasons that compel value deserve the same attention given to the attainment of value-respecting practices.

Two overarching problems appear in this account, however, when we consider its pertinence to an investigation of the object. The first is that any biocentric model, by definition, can only extend to those whose constitution is biological (from "*bios*": any form of organic, i.e. living, matter). This necessarily excludes the object *qua* object. Deep ecology may succeed in escaping a human-slanted perspective, but only by fractionally expanding our appreciation of what we might think of as the *élan vital* to include those organisms whose unique functions and interactions characterize and sustain our ecologies, and in so doing, our worldly habitats as we know them. This point segues into a second. The reason why this quality of *living* seems so integral to our ethical frameworks is because of an attitude that comes naturally to us. During the time when deep ecology was still in its nascent stages, E. O. Wilson was popularizing a notion called "biophilia": in his words, the "innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes."<sup>3</sup> The most extreme form of biophilia that we must contend with, of course, is anthropocentrism (our natural self-interest), but this can be expanded to include all living matter (animal and vegetable, but sadly not mineral). While there is no absolute agreement on the motivating factors behind this innate tendency, Wilson and later likeminded scholars ascribe it to a biological impetus and its capability to "[confer]

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2. Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 1985), 70-71.

3. E. O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 1.

distinctive advantages in the human struggle to persist, adapt, and thrive as a species.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, to the extent to which it is accurate to say that one can be genetically “hardwired” (since gene expression is a tricky thing), humans have a predisposition toward a manner of thinking that intuitively favours consideration of those elements of their surroundings that exhibit the dynamic properties of life.

We might conclude, then, that deep ecology “cuts too close to the bone” to offer much to a focused investigation of the object, but that it does so as a symptom of a greater and deeply-ingrained practice that is difficult to elude. This observation can serve to suggest a methodological point for us. If we want to talk about the object even-handedly, we must do so in a way that respects the limitations that we have in recognizing and ascribing value without, as a consequence, doing an injustice to the object by commandeering it for human purposes. This, then, is the task list set before us. We must find a way to a) get at the object proper that b) investigates its intrinsic value without c) failing to recognize its quiddity or d) subsuming it below an *overriding* self-interest, but that nonetheless e) minimizes the obstacles posed by our inherent biophilia. What we need is to examine the archive of the subject-object problem to locate a framework capable of examining the object fairly without overstepping our epistemological and axiological parameters.

Of course, tracing a historiography of discourse on the subject/object relationship would, interpreted liberally, entail a far-reaching project well outside of the scope of the present undertaking. Such an effort would easily stretch as far back in history as Aristotle and his differentiation between the nutritive, sensitive, and rational soul in Book III of his work *De Anima*, where these rational faculties – built on those “lower” levels of soul that inhabit plant and animal life – provide an essence of the human, out of which he

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4. Stephen R. Kellert, *Kinship to Mastery: Biophilia in Human Evolution and Development* (Washington: Island Press, 1997), 3.

constructs both ontological and ethical categories and prescriptions, respectively.<sup>5</sup> This would then lead us to draw a line through many extremely broad philosophical movements throughout intellectual history: idealism, which posits the fundamental immateriality of reality; realism, which contrarily asserts that the external world that we perceive is independent of the mind; skepticism, which withdraws from the question of reality through a suspension of belief; one could continue with minimal effort. Each of these doctrines is heavily weighted with a number of highly nuanced “strains” or subtypes, each of which inhabits a unique territory in terms of its place – not infrequently disputed or qualified – within the larger dialogue. Each of these doctrines offers a wealth of both explications and implications in terms of both the identity (i.e. ontological status) and valuation (i.e. worth) of materiality within the dominant *Weltanschauung*. Yet each of these doctrines merely glosses over the most blatantly metaphysical aspects of the subject/object relationship, and in itself only does so with the broadest of brushstrokes. Vast, paradigm-shifting ideologies exist that take materiality *qua* social good to be the crux of its elaborate framework – take, for example, historical materialism, which contends as part of its central thesis that human nature (or “human species-being”) is determined by the uniquely universal way in which we, as a species, apply our consciousness and will to productive life-activity, or “life-engendering life.”<sup>6</sup> Part of what grants this intersection so much purchase is that it represents a seed of human interest that takes root seemingly wherever the winds of self-reflexivity blow it. Attuned to these concerns, one can easily see the intellectual landscape readily take shape as a pastoral in which the thing cultivated is not livestock or foodstuffs, but the *thing*.

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5. Aristotle, “On the Soul,” in *Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. J. Barnes, vol. 1, Bollingen series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 641-692.

6. Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 76.

This being said, it becomes clear that some engagements of objecthood are more directly pertinent than others, if we flesh out what is at the heart of our interest. A number of statements can be made here. To reinvolve this image of the chimera, we might argue that what seems to form the Gordian knot of contemporary literature on the topic is the node in which ontology and politics converge – a philosophy known as, naturally, “political ontology.” Contributions to this field are anything but homogenous, representing a diversity of priorities as encompassing as each of its constituent signifiers. Before we can agree on what comprises a political ontology, we must have consensus on what intellectual matter, precisely, makes up “the political” and “the ontological” – answers that, while easy enough to *circumscribe* through a combination of etymology and discourse analysis, are nearly impossible to *pinpoint*, since this would necessarily require a level of reduction or compression of conceptual content. This is not to suggest that the terminology that we are invoking is loose or “woolly,” but merely that it exists as a nexus of intersecting discussions, each negotiating its distinctive material in such a way that their juncture signifies less a unified meaning than a kind of diagrammatic union. In political science, for example, this term indicates political dimensions of the ontological, but its aim is not to examine, through a political lens, the imposed boundaries in ontological thought; rather, to be immersed in the ontological is to offer what the discipline terms “second-order” explanations, “self-referential, reflexive and ‘meta’,” that delimit and investigate the margins of ontological territory as “the world *as political scientists assume it to be*,” a distinct if hereditary outgrowth of its philosophical lineage.<sup>7</sup>

From a neo-materialist standpoint, however, political ontology can refer to something quite different: the sense in which ontology (taken here to be the study of being and its categories, naturally including materiality, *sensu lato*) is intrinsically bound up with the political. This term has not received an unequivocal acceptance into the disciplinary lexicon, containing as it does what appears *prima facie* to be an insoluble paradox; when

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7. Liam Stanley, “Rethinking the Definition and Role of Ontology in Political Science,” *Politics* 32, no. 2 (2012): 94.

it *is* welcomed into the fold, it remains characterized by sundry positions and methodologies. If we take politics to be, in its barest sense, “theories or practice of government or administration,” such an idea might justifiably be considered opaque at best, and nonsensical at worst.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, seeing that our interest in ontology is in the liminal space between the object and the subject, the fact that there is a natural and unassailable limit point that we are confronted with any time that we try to, as subjects, achieve an intimate epistemological bond with objects is a germane one. As Levi Bryant concisely comments, we are “subjects, and, as subjects, cannot get outside of our own minds to determine whether our representations [of objects] map on to any sort of external reality.”<sup>9</sup> It thus becomes difficult to conceive of how, even if we tentatively accept this as-yet nebulous notion of political ontology, how we can find a voice to *express* a politics concerned with something that we have already recognized as radically other than ourselves.

But these two challenges are not insurmountable. In the first case, what is required is merely a reconsideration of the word “govern” that provides the basis of politics. To govern: this is to “rule with authority, esp. with the authority of a sovereign; to direct and control the actions and affairs of (a people, a state or its members), whether despotically or constitutionally; to rule or regulate the affairs of (a body of men, corporation); to command the garrison of (a fort).”<sup>10</sup> Is it really an impossible act to extend these actions – ruling, directing, controlling, regulating, and commanding – to the realm of the material? It may not seem *intuitive* to do so, but we might comment that, not only do the

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8. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “politics,” accessed December 1, 2014, <http://www.oed.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/view/Entry/237575?redirectedFrom=politics>.

9. Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011), 14.

10. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “govern,” accessed December 1, 2014, <http://www.oed.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/view/Entry/80304>.

notions of personhood or citizenship not enter explicitly into the denotation of “government” and thus “politics,” but these very notions are themselves hotly contested to this day insomuch as they fashion critical links to moral standing – and furthermore carry with them a long and mutable past, heavily sedimented with political interest.<sup>11</sup> One might further argue that, were one inclined to interpret this word liberally as we have requested, it may fit the definition *à la lettre*, but only at the cost of betraying its semantic “spirit.” To govern over anything other than subjects that form a cohesive collective may no longer be paradoxical, but nor can it be deployed in language meaningfully; at best, it seems like a loose metaphor for instrumental usage of resources. Against this, however, we can suggest that we may again be facing a question of semantics: what it means to be a subject, and what it is that belongs to the subject both *essentially* and *exclusively*, that renders it eligible for participation in the realm of “the political.” Pursuing this line of inquiry is no small task, but for now, perhaps we can simply note that the exploration of a liminal space between the subject and the object cracks open the possibility of previously unforeseen commonalities that are worthy of our attention. This is also a welcome place for Jacques Rancière’s comment that “[w]hat is proper to politics is thus lost at the outset if politics is thought of as a specific way of living. Politics cannot be defined on the basis of any pre-existing subject. The political 'difference' that makes it possible to think its subject must be sought in the form of its relation. ... *If there is something 'proper' to politics, it consists entirely in this relationship which is not a relationship between subjects, but one between two contradictory terms through which a subject is defined.*”<sup>12</sup>

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11. While the most obvious examples of this come from historical struggles for racial and gender equality, one can – regardless of their position on the matter – also consider the discourse on abortion and the legal status of the fetus for evidence that personhood is not a fixed concept.

12. Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics,” trans. Davide Panagia and Rachel Bowlby, *Theory & Event* 5, no. 3 (2001): 4.

In the second case, the problem seems to essentially reside in the fact that we have trouble reconciling the idea of dealing in the coin of the political – that which is inextricably intertwined with authority, power, and constraint – as an act of vocal representation on behalf of a body that, although acknowledged as deserving of consideration through our act of representation, is forever barred from participatory feedback in light of an essential feature of its identity. The value of and right to self-representation is so fully entrenched in our ethical beliefs that it feels unnatural to consciously adopt a practice that we know from the start will remain incompatible with these fundamental principles. However, it is important to realize that this is something that we as societies do *all the time*. It is a necessary if unfortunate consequence of the gulf between *descriptive* states of affairs and *prescriptive* ethical mandates – the fact that the conditions of life cannot always line up with ideal circumstances for making moral choices. To say that we should have a hands-off policy in regards to consideration of those who cannot speak for themselves is to condemn, to give a handful of obvious cases, both the infant and the invalid. To be uncertain as to whether or not something is a best practice does not excuse, or even provide reasonable grounds for, inaction, given that the need for action is transparent.

This political interest in the ontological has taken many forms in recent years, and is evidenced by the emergence of new neologisms and even full vocabularies that reflect its relationship to various social realities and intellectual currents. Some of these trends are more clearly aligned with the subject side of the subject/object “spectrum”<sup>13</sup>: for

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13. I use this term with some hesitation for two reasons: first, because of the potential implications of the quantification of subjectivity, which has the potential to pose serious ethical problems in suggesting that one may be “more” or “less” human; second, because to place these two concepts beside each other as two composite parts of a dichotomy is to suggest that they are oppositional, which is to take a certain dominant historical narrative as the truth as we simultaneously put it into question – a kind of performative contradiction.

example, we might look to Elaine Graham's notion of "ontological hygiene." Ontological hygiene is not a phrase used to identify and correct the *status quo* in favour of a framework implemented as a radical attempt to collapse the *res cogitans* into the *res extensa*, nor is it even a straightforward claim that the two are entirely congruous. Rather, it acknowledges that there is a "symbiotic relationship between humanity and its artefacts, a *blurring* of agent and object, external and internal, organic and artificial [my emphasis]." <sup>14</sup> This fact attains a political edge for Graham when she superimposes upon it the fact that these "fictions of imporous essences" are created *and adapted* <sup>15</sup> discursively as a form of "complicity" with the belief that agency and personhood are in finite supply <sup>16</sup> – making the possibility of imbrication simultaneously a "threat of similarity." <sup>17</sup> This authoritarian attitude, which she aligns with Bruno Latour's ideas around purification, <sup>18</sup> is what bolsters conservative attitudes toward hybridity at a time when technological advances across the board (e.g. medical procedures, telecommunications) promise quality of life enhancements in a way (i.e. invasively, immersively) that those who hold such attitudes would consider inimical to their beliefs. What is at stake here is the subject, and how ontological practices wield the power to

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14. Elaine L. Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 33.

15. The emphasis on the adaptive aspect of these "fictions" is meant to highlight its status as evidence of a *mens rea* behind the changing conceptual matter of the "human." While the mutability of the term does not illustrate anything *intrinsically*, the dynamic history of the term indicates a *motivation* to be located.

16. *Ibid.*, 35.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 33; Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 35.

regulate potential reconfigurations of human embodiment and thus our existential freedoms.

If we tweak this formulation only slightly, however, we can see the more material angle. Carrying forward Edwin Hutchins' theory of distributed cognition, disciplines such as cyborg anthropology re-purpose this perennial topic to scrutinise, for example, the interaction of technology and cerebral memory. By articulating how physical artefacts can be seen as vessels of knowledge, cyborg anthropology gestures toward a cognitive model that not only gains traction and resonance in a contemporary world increasingly diffused with technological integration, both at an individual and collective level, but also puts our own status as subjects – or, rather, the clarity of demarcations that *inscribe* and *constrain* such a status – into question. This is not to say that this discipline is engaged primarily in complicating the notion of the subject with what we might call a “pro-material bent.” As N. Katherine Hayles rightly points out, discourse on the cyborg body often falls into time-honoured rhetoric that yet valorizes the mind at the expense of the flesh, eschewing an extension of intrinsic value to the material in favour of extending it a conditional acknowledgment of utility – a utility predicated upon its ability to deal in the currency of the cognitive. “To the extent that the posthuman constructs embodiment as the instantiation of thought/information,” she comments, “it continues the liberal tradition<sup>19</sup> rather than disrupts it.”<sup>20</sup> However, it also bears the seed of a perspective that re-casts materiality with the hue of a distinctively, *traditionally* subjective quality. Hayles herself, in her conclusion, cites Hutchins in agreement, quoting a passage where he states

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19. Hayles uses the term “liberal tradition” to refer to the more specific idea of the liberal humanist subject, which emphasizes the subject as a discrete, self-possessed “thinker” at the expense of an understanding of the subject that is more attuned to the socio-political aspects of the body and its effects on self-determination.

20. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 5.

that “[w]hat used to look like internalization [of thought and subjectivity] now appears as a gradual propagation of organized functional properties across a set of malleable media,”<sup>21</sup> commenting that this is a “potent antidote to the view that parses virtuality as a division between an inert body that is left behind and a disembodied subjectivity that inhabits a virtual realm.”<sup>22</sup> While radical transhumanists who conceive of the body as mere “meat” are not extinct (as we might see, for example, in the enthusiastic crosspollination of cyberpunk literature), there is a growing interest in seeing the body and materiality at large as integral parts of the constitution of the subject. More than just an enabling ground, such philosophies see this materiality as a persistent and significant influence on what it is to be a subject.

While this gets us in the direction of the object, however, it admittedly stops short of what we discussed above in our consideration of political ontology. Cyborg anthropology may dabble in both the political and the ontological, but materiality appears only as a means to “get to” the subject – a modificative appendage. This is illustrated forcefully by the emphasis on bodies, the “material shells” traditionally seen to quite literally “body forth” consciousness, and supplementary technologies with instrumental values already affixed. The object *qua* “bare” object has little place here. This appendage, it is true, forms a sweeping alteration to some of our fundamental notions of the human essence, but the fact that it is this human essence that is at the forefront of study precludes the possibility of a true *equivocality*. We might also point out, as a methodological consideration, that if we are cognizant of our roles as subjects investigating objects, and we subscribe to the belief that we can never achieve a “view from nowhere” and that all knowledge is in fact situated, then – if we are touting ourselves as advocates (or, at least, interested parties) in the material – then we ought not err in the direction of ourselves, but open ourselves up more widely to the object, and do so with a level of self-reflexivity and

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21. Edwin Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 312.

22. Hayles, 290.

awareness of our inhabitation of a perspective.<sup>23</sup> How, then, can we turn more sharply to the object proper?

Although it may seem counterintuitive, one answer, I believe, lays in the direction of phenomenology. At first, this may simply seem like a misreading of what phenomenology stands for: to go back to the things themselves (as phenomenology famously proclaims) seems like, for our purposes, an ideal maxim, but there is much more below the surface than a superficial aphorism. Understood literally, such a dictate could be assumed to express the same sentiment that lays behind empirical enterprise. Empiricism relies on evidence provided through sensory input to come to conclusions about the world around us, and if we take the ultimate project of science to be consilience of knowledge, science uses empiricism to fashion stringent methodological guidelines so that we can be assured that such a project always contains, even if as an elusive horizon, the possibility of internal cohesion within self-evident boundaries by affixing it firmly to our access to the external world. What more could we ask for in a thoroughgoing examination of the object? Indeed, there is a way in which empiricism remains closer to the physical object than phenomenology. This is because empiricism *commits* to the object in a way that phenomenology cannot – which returns us to our maxim.

To return to the things themselves is not exactly to turn our attention to the object. Rather, to do so is to respond to a call to put thought to work as a solvent against the

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23. Donna Haraway's denigration of the "god trick" well-encapsulates the sentiments behind such a critique of insensitivity to epistemological positioning, arguing pertinently that "rational knowledge does not pretend to disengagement: to be everywhere and so nowhere, to be free from interpretation, from being represented, to be fully self-contained or fully formalizable," but rather "is a process of ongoing critical interpretation among 'fields' of interpreters or decoders." See Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 590.

lacquer of ideology that coats our experience; it is to strip away the inessential, or to get at the raw data offered up to our lived experience. Part of the process of accessing this “raw data” is to suspend judgment concerning the reality of the external world: this part of the phenomenological method is referred to as the phenomenological *epoché*, and involves “put[ting] out of action the general positing which belongs to the essence of the natural attitude... parenthesiz[ing] everything which that positing encompasses with respect to being.”<sup>24</sup> (The “natural attitude” here refers to the common sense understanding of and manner of treating the world that we adopt in our everyday lives.) In other words, a fundamental part of the phenomenological reduction, in obtaining direct access to “things,” involves – *requires* – putting into question the very *existence* of the objects of our knowledge. While it must be emphasized that such a position is not tantamount to refusing the existence of these objects, it does lend at least some credence to the possibility. If the object may not even exist, it is hard to conceive of it as important and originary.

Bearing this in mind, how can we see phenomenology as an acceptable (never mind *ideal*) means to approach the object? To do so, we might simply see this practice as not a dismissal of the importance of the objective realm, but rather an act of epistemological humility. The *epoché* exists as a central tenet of phenomenology because, in the eyes of its practitioners, it is a critical step in allowing the essence or *eidos* of the phenomenon to surface. One of the consequences of existing at an advanced point in intellectual history is simultaneously a reason for celebration and apprehension: thousands of years of speculation on a plethora of subjects means that said subjects have a wealth of relevant discursive material, making them both a fertile ground for a sublatory model of knowledge acquisition and a serious impediment to considering these subjects as if with “fresh eyes.” Materially, the object is only the object, discrete and self-contained; as soon as we move in the direction of material or intellectual culture, however, we come to see

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24. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), 61.

matter as heavily imbued with subjective purposes, beliefs, opinions, values, *etc.* If we want to lift the weight of these subjective narratives, it is necessary to take a cue from Descartes and start with a *tabula rasa*. The suspension of belief is thus not a mark of disparagement, but of sensitivity to the interpretive powers of our subjective consciousness on a radically other object of knowledge, and accordingly, an attempt to minimize the influence of an intellectual environment that persistently, pervasively, but invisibly sediments our experience of the world. Rather than seeing this as yet another prioritization of the subject, we might consider it a gesture toward recognition and mitigation of “the violent hubris of Western philosophy, a tradition that has consistently failed to mind the gap between concept and reality, object and thing.”<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the relationship of empiricism to the object is one of convenience. Empiricism sees the object as a kind of surface strata that has locked within it answers that can lend themselves to a larger fact-collecting project, in which the object exhausts its value; in Heideggerian terms, its interest in *being* is always secondary to that of beings. This formulation may seem confusing, since we are interested in precisely these beings. However, it is the *being* of the being outside of its pure facticity that concerns us. This is not to say that phenomenology has no ulterior motives of its own: it is, at its root, concerned with studying structures of consciousness and how phenomena appear to it. Nothing could be more completely interested in the human condition. However, it may be possible to re-deploy such a strategy of investigating the object in the object’s favour. By eliminating the intellectual noise that dogs other frameworks and focusing on our being-in-the-world, we may be more successful in allowing the object to present *itself*, basing our analysis of its status and worth on testimony that *it* offers. We may, then, find a way to satisfy our requirements of a) getting at the object proper in a manner that allows us to b) investigate its intrinsic value without c) failing to respect its quiddity or d) prioritizing our self-interest or e) submitting to our own biophilia.

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25. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 13.

Before we use phenomenology to our advantage, however, we must first arrive at an angle from which we can approach it. My research will consist of a number of prior steps. In my first chapter, I would like to look at a recent text that falls loosely into the category of speculative realism: Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*. My consideration of this text will circumscribe a number of questions about how her unique ideas about a vital matter can help us develop our own work, and will lead me to consider the importance of autonomic processes (action-oriented perception) in moving forward with Bennett's vision. In my second chapter, I will attempt to mitigate the problem of these autonomic processes by introducing Clark and Chalmers' extended mind theory in order to complicate the relationship between physical object and subjective mind. Finally, in my third and final chapter, I will use phenomenological description in order to push the implications of Clark and Chalmers' work to their fullest extent, arguing that if matter is integral to memory, it is only ever because memory owes itself to *matter*.

## 2 Vital Materialism: The Action of Materiality and the Materiality of Action

For most devotees of the Humanities with even peripheral interest in dramatic theory, Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect is a familiar concept.<sup>26</sup> For a single idea, it performs a lot of work: it inscribes the value of self-reflexive technique into performance; it lives out the political possibilities embedded in narrative acts of representation; it perforates the boundaries between spectator and critic. But this is not to say that the idea has a purely reflective appeal, or that it is a practice whose natural habitat exists somewhere in the vicinity of an ivory tower. As aficionados of Beau Willimon's political drama *House of Cards* will likely attest, the dry drawl adopted by Frank Underwood as he breaks down the fourth wall to deliver cold and candid commentary as the plot thickens is anything but ineffectual intellectualist bombast.<sup>27</sup> While his rhetoric and delivery certainly play a part in its efficacy, the mere act of breaking down that fourth wall strikes the audience with a sense of immediacy and self-awareness that transforms their occupation from voyeur to interlocutor, casting the narrative in a strange new light. This is not how television drama is "supposed" to work. In conventional formulas, traditions clearly isolate that which happens on-camera (the actively unfolding plot) from that which happens off-camera (the purely receptive audience). Breaking with these traditions thwarts audience expectations, and this retraction of the immersive and escapist qualities of the viewing experience comes in tandem with feelings of alienation or estrangement.

Even if all the world's a stage, it is not true in any relevant sense, for us: our current interests reside not in the players, but in the *audience*. The alienation effect works to

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26. Bertolt Brecht, "On Chinese Acting," ed. Bernard Hewitt, *The Tulane Drama Review* 6, no. 1 (1961): 130-136.

27. David Fincher and Joel Schumacher, *House of Cards: Season 1*, Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2013.

highlight the artifice sustained by technical strategies in order to pave clear roads for the audience toward identification with and/or empathy for characters – a tactic not free of political implications. On the flipside, we are interested in highlighting the artifice sustained by *discursive* strategies in order to pave clear roads for the *subject* toward attitudes of *otherness* and *primacy* over *objects*. Achieving such a reverse alienation effect (a “kinship effect,” we might call it) is, perhaps unsurprisingly, difficult – the narrative that we are aiming to disrupt is not a fictional construction that we watch in one-hour stints, but our actual *lives*, in which we are permanently immersed. Our tactics, then, will need to work harder to achieve their own political implications. We have already identified and briefly broached this in the context of biocentrism *via* biophilia, both in its weaker (animal, vegetable) and stronger (anthropocentrism) forms. Such bias is sufficiently self-evident and self-explanatory that further analysis does not seem necessary, although we must still account for it. But this conversation can easily be extended.

As part of the overarching problem of finding a way to overcome the social obstacles to re-envisioning objecthood, this conversation is explicitly addressed and taken up by Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Bennett’s objective is much the same as our own: she too has as her target the *mis-en-scène* of the glowing subject, enshrined in soul and standing against a darkened backdrop of inert, brute matter. She too is interested in turning away from systems and styles of thought that firmly entrench the subject as the primary object of study. Naturally, then, she too recognizes the concatenation of circumstances that plague such efforts. A number of factors come into play that confound both theoretical and pragmatic discussion on change that, even if relatively slight, is widely distributed across the domains of the social, cultural, ethical, metaphysical, *etc.* In her project, Bennett comments on how she is forced to “shift from the language of epistemology to that of ontology, from a focus on an elusive recalcitrance hovering between immanence and transcendence (the absolute) to an active, earthy, not-

quite-human capaciousness (vibrant matter).”<sup>28</sup> This difficulty in language and in scholarly province is exacerbated by a number of intuitions that we have in regards to our own self-identity, and in this particular case, a foundational part of our argument is the “oxymoronic truism that the human is not exclusively human, and that we are made up of its”<sup>29</sup> – she goes so far as to consider, for example, the crook of one’s elbow as “a special ecosystem, a bountiful home to no fewer than six tribes of bacteria.”<sup>30</sup> One of the primary obstacles that she identifies is a consanguine concern to biocentrism, inasmuch as it relates to involuntary, biologically-based practices: action-oriented perception, or the way in which the mind instinctively flattens its environment into brute matter for manipulation.<sup>31</sup> We might recall the law of the instrument here (otherwise known as Maslow’s hammer), the familiar adage by which we are reminded that, if all one has is a hammer, one tends to see all problems as a nail. Action-oriented perception, as a tool that we use to help us engage with the world in a productive manner, thus might be seen as the hammer; all of our engagements with the material world then take on not only the prospect of being conducive to such treatment, but become imbued with a fundamental quality of being amenable to such treatment – it becomes expressed not only as a virtual possibility, but a primary element of its *identity*.

What this ultimately boils down to is the tension inherent in the is-ought dichotomy. This is to say: regardless of pressures exerted by normative statements, factual circumstance and its corresponding exigencies play a dominant role in the basic act of perception. Of

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28. Bennett, 3.

29. *Ibid.*, 112.

30. Nicholas Wade, “Bacteria Thrive In Inner Elbow; No Harm Done,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 2008. While our reconceptualization of matter differs quite fundamentally from Bennett’s, the similarities in the projects mean that the methodological concerns that she faces are transferable.

31. Bennett, *xiv*.

course, to argue that action-oriented perception is a mere “problem” would be absurd; our project is not interested in withdrawing from the instrumental interactions with the objective realm, but rather is interested in reconceptualising the affordances given to us by this objective realm, and how we ought to attribute values to this relationship. We are cognizant of our dependence on action-oriented perception for our survival. We simply agree with Bennett (as well as Bergson and Nietzsche) that it is “dangerous and counterproductive to live this fiction all the time,”<sup>32</sup> and seek a means to transform this default attitude into one that is more sensitive to the complexities of our material *milieu*. Recognizing action-oriented perception as a kind of Maslow’s hammer – a tool that, while constructive, overextends its utility to detrimental effect – is the first step in crafting a perspective whose teleology lines up with both our needs as organisms and the quiddity of the object.

There are a couple of steps that must be taken to accept such perception as a legitimate obstacle against a project of re-imagination. The first is quite straightforward: is action-oriented behaviour in fact *perceptual*? Establishing this behaviour as not just conditioned through external practices makes for a much stronger argument for its intractability. In his paper “Action-oriented Perception,” Bence Nanay argues compellingly that it is. This argument requires a number of steps. First, Nanay outlines how what he terms the “Q-ability” of an object – Q-ability being a relational property determined jointly by features of the object and features of the agent engaging said object (e.g. edibility, graspability, readability) – is a necessary corollary of being able to perform action Q with the object. For instance, the readability of object *x* (e.g. a book) requires certain features of the object (e.g. numerous pages that have been impressed with typographic symbols, the arrangement of these typographic symbols according to the rules of a certain language) as well as certain features of the agent (e.g. basic literacy, the perceptual faculty necessary to internalize these symbols), provided that external variables such as time and circumstance do not intervene. If these conditions are met, then the object is considered

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32. Ibid.

readable.<sup>33</sup> He then further contends that this Q-ability is necessarily rooted in *perception*.<sup>34</sup> This he distinguishes from the possibility that Q-ability is rooted in a non-perceptual state that takes its input from a perceptual state, which would not at all be the same thing (what he calls a “non-perceptual account”): this would be to say that the Q-ability of an object is only *metaphorically* perceived, and that to “perceive” in this case is only a manner of speaking, since the perception pertains only to the qualities of the object which are then cognized as congruent with characteristics of Q-ability.<sup>35</sup>

This non-perceptual account is rife with problems. It would require, for instance, that the object be supported by a plethora of independent beliefs that could only theoretically congeal into the grounds of possibility for Q-ability. Let us return to our example of a book. An argument for action-oriented perception, which can be otherwise expressed as the claim that the Q-ability of an object is perceptual, would believe that the perceptual process is what is responsible for determining the Q-ability of the object. When I perceive the book, I (being both literate and possessing the relevant perceptual faculties) perceive its readability from certain qualities that I perceive – its layering of pages heavily adorned with typographic symbols that I recognize as participating in a system of signification, *etc.* To suggest that I instead perceive these qualities independently of any assessment as to their Q-ability, continuing on to an inferential or non-inferential process

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33. The explicit formula that Nanay uses runs as follows: *object x is Q-able for agent A at time t in circumstances C if and only if it is not impossible for A to Q x at t in C* (which he refines in order to negotiate several different accounts of impossibility, the formula ultimately becoming: *an object x is Q-able for agent A at time t in circumstances C if and only if there is a sufficiently high number of relatively close possible worlds where A's attempt to Q x at t in C succeeds*). Bence Nanay, “Action-Oriented Perception,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 20, no. 3 (2010): 430-431.

34. *Ibid.*, 430.

35. *Ibid.*, 437.

that guides me toward Q-ability, is to invoke an ever-burgeoning mass of beliefs that would need to be verified in order to make this very same determination – that the book is not going to disappear into thin air, *etc.* Nanay, however, points out that this criticism is not particularly difficult to overcome: the backlog of perceptual requirements to consider an object Q-able in a non-perceptual account of Q-ability simply makes attribution of Q-ability arduous, and does not deny the object Q-ability – and, furthermore, we can use assumption to cut through some of that arduousness.<sup>36</sup> The beauty of inductive reasoning is that it gives us a stepping stone to probable beliefs that we are justified in acting on, allowing us to fast-track through the realm of pure possibility without the likelihood of getting “tripped up.”

However, non-perceptual accounts suffer from a more serious problem: namely, the fact that the way that we act in the world often puts our representation of the Q-ability of an object at loggerheads with our knowledge of the Q-ability of the object. Nanay uses the example of a beach ball: if thrown in my direction, I raise up my hands to catch it, even if a layer of plexiglass of which I am aware interrupts its trajectory. It is a voluntary movement: I have an awareness of having initiated this movement; my body responds to the situation according to the material conditions in which it finds itself (e.g. my arms will reach higher or lower depending on the arc of the ball). It cannot thus be said to be a reflex movement, like the striking of a medical instrument to provoke an involuntary physical response.<sup>37</sup> And yet this action puts my representation of the Q-ability of the

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36. He summarizes this concisely when he states that “[n]ot representing the object as something that will disappear once I touch it does not imply representing it as something that will not disappear once I touch it: not representing x as F does not imply representing x as non-F. In other words, it is possible that we just take it for granted that objects we touch will not disappear without explicitly representing it as something that will not disappear.” *Ibid.*, 438.

37. *Ibid.*, 439.

object (the catchability of the beach ball, affirmed in my voluntary movement) at odds with my knowledge of the Q-ability of the object (I know that the ball is not catchable, since there is an impenetrable obstacle that stands between myself and the ball). If we want to continue with our example of the book, we might say that, in the event that I come across a text written in a language in which I am not conversant, I cannot help but represent the book as readable – perhaps even leaf through it – even though I simultaneously know that the language barrier is insurmountable. Nanay frames this as a kind of knockout punch to non-perceptual accounts of Q-ability. Beliefs are famously sensitive to beliefs, and perception is famously belief-independent.<sup>38</sup> If I know that the ball is not catchable, I should not represent the ball as catchable if this representation is a belief, since beliefs are sensitive to beliefs. Yet I *do*. The explanation that Nanay offers, then, is that this representation of the ball as catchable can be clarified if we consider that Q-ability is in fact perceptual. When we perceive, we do so independently of our beliefs. Perceptions and beliefs may need to be reconciled internally *after* the act of perception, but the perception is never “through a glass, darkly” – ignoring external variables such as indeterminacy, which relate to the mechanism of perception itself, the received perception is divorced from the interjections of belief. In Nanay’s words, “[w]e literally see objects as edible or climbable.”<sup>39</sup>

Having established that the Q-ability of an object is in fact perceptual, there is another question to consider: can we confirm that the Q-ability of an object is a natural attitude rather than a specialized form of perception? In other words, we have compiled an argument for why action-oriented perspectives of objects are ultimately perceptual, but we have *not* compiled an argument for the degree to which action-oriented perspectives contribute to our overall acts of perception. If this is, for example, a relatively specialized and infrequent phenomenon (perhaps “switched” on and off according to either practical

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38. Ibid., 440.

39. Ibid.

necessity or our temporary comportment), it should not be seriously considered as an obstacle to our project. In our example of the book, we demonstrate how we cannot help but *perceive* rather than, say, *infer* the book as readable. But to say that we cannot help but perceive the book as readable *inasmuch as the readability of the book arises as a latent question posed by the object* is not to say that any and all perceptions of this book will *necessarily* engage its readability. In response to this query, one might point to phenomenological experience to argue that the Q-ability of an object is part and parcel of a natural attitude that is neither specialized and infrequent nor insurmountable. Alva Nöe, in making a slightly different point, illustrates this idea well with the phenomenon of eating. When we eat, we think of ourselves as eating the foodstuff at hand (for example, a tomato). In terms of how we process the situation, we are never eating a *part* of the foodstuff – although, in reality, this is in fact exactly what we are doing (e.g. we are only ever consuming pieces of the tomato, even though we think of ourselves as “eating the tomato”). Why? Because this phenomenon of eating appears to us as part of a larger, purposive action – much in the same way that, with our book, we may only be comprehending one word at a time, but we would never reply earnestly to an inquiry about our task that we are “reading a word,” but would instead respond that we are “reading a book,” since this is the larger, purposive action with which we are engaged. In arguing otherwise, you would miss the point: “[y]ou would misdescribe the... experience of a solid, voluminous item of fruit, the tomato, if you were to describe it as an experience as a bit of surface.”<sup>40</sup> Nöe’s point is that if we “take our experience at face value,” it can reveal itself in a more objective way (i.e. eating a bit of tomato), but this is not phenomenologically true of the experience that we described (i.e. eating the tomato).<sup>41</sup> It may be correct, and we can derive this explanation through the superimposition of a certain attitude: it is, therefore, not insurmountable. But the strangeness of thinking this way gestures toward a more natural, instrumental attitude.

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40. Alva Nöe, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 76.

41. *Ibid.*

What has this analysis contributed to our understanding of the subject's relationship with the object? Its primary function was to emphasize what we have already, in the course of developing the problem driving this investigation, discovered: discourse on materiality can be and *is* influenced below the conscious level, and changing this discourse is thus not a straightforward problem whose solution consists of recognition and thus resolution. It is reassuring to frame ethical problems much like mathematical equations: if we have the equation (the problem), and we can obtain the value of  $x$  (the ethical framework), then we can simply apply the value of  $x$  (the ethical framework) to the equation (the problem) and all tension will dissolve in a satisfying, effervescent process that reveals a simplified answer. In what comes across as a rather endearingly world-weary tone, James Franklin – in a paper that carefully considers the parallels and lack thereof between mathematics and ethics – deliberates wistfully on the idea of “morals [that] were like the laws of number and logic: eternal truths that absolutely constrain all possible behaviours. Then, the problems of ethics would be settled on a calm and rational basis, once and for all. Tribal differences would vanish, behaviour would conform naturally to ethical norms, and evil-doing would become as rare as arithmetical errors.”<sup>42</sup> As the sweeping nature of his ideals suggest, however, ethics is a good deal more complicated than this (pragmatically speaking).

This brings us, then, to our final step in recognizing action-oriented perception as a legitimate obstacle. We might frame the motivating question thus: what repercussions does action-oriented perception have for our project? Action-oriented perception gestures to another way in which our attitudes toward materiality are, at least in part, an outgrowth of our biological apparatuses and the way in which they have evolved to operate. Our deliberate and inventive bond with our environment is one of the most distinguishing characteristics of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, even if the distance between human and non-human animal behaviour shrinks each new day with the growing body of research on the

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42. James Franklin, “On the Parallel Between Mathematics and Morals,” *Philosophy* 79, no. 1 (2004): 97.

topic. On the one hand, this makes it very difficult to “unstir the cream from the coffee – to disentangle the cultural from the natural.”<sup>43</sup> This is perfectly congenial to the project at hand. However, it also severely complicates our attempts to achieve a sort of *ekstatis* through which we may problematize what Rancière calls the “partition of the sensible.”<sup>44</sup> In short, one is right to doubt the legitimacy of an *is-ought* fallacy, but one simply cannot epistemologically doubt the factual veracity of the *is* and its constraining force on how we perceive and thus understand the world.

Bennett’s answer to this paradox, while admittedly not devoid of qualifications, is at least explicit: revise (or, perhaps, append a revision to) our notions of agency. *Vibrant Matter* acts as part manifesto, part historiography; in it, she addresses how a number of canonical and/or influential thinkers have developed accounts of materiality that, to varying degrees and with varying levels of transparency and intention, constructed concepts that imparted something roughly equivalent to agency to the object. Of course, since we are sensitive to the power of language in producing effects, we must try our best to avoid subject-centered vocabularies that might undermine our efforts as we deploy them.<sup>45</sup> We still run

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43. Bennett, 116.

44. Rancière, 19-20.

45. Bennett also reflects on the differences between the words “object” and “thing,” which she sees as being involved to different degrees in subject-centered thought (i.e. “object” having a subjective cast). My choice to employ the word “object” is for several reasons. First, the words that Bennett borrows from Latour (“actant,” “operator”) are more causally-oriented than seems appropriate given the direction of this project, which is ultimately less concerned with issues strictly relating to physical causation *per se*. Second, the word “object” implies a discrete unit, thus its use seems intuitive in proceeding with a project that aims to be livable, and thus invokes everyday items as examples. Given that I am not wholly committed to all of Bennett’s positions, I consider this terminological decision to be a reasonable choice.

the risk of performative contradiction, if weak. Furthermore, the philosophical lineage of the term “agency” is so exhaustively worked-over that it is difficult to envision it as unsaturated by strictly cerebral notions of purposiveness and intention, while Bennett finds it “both possible and desirable to experiment with the idea of an impersonal agency integral to materiality as such, a vitality distinct from human or divine purposiveness.”<sup>46</sup> Having a distinction set up thus not only exhibits care for intellectual integrity, but allows Bennett to give the object the chance for unique properties (which will allow her to more easily move between the epistemological and ontological – a concern that we voiced earlier). For this reason, Bennett refers to Bruno Latour’s work for a vernacular more complementary to her sensibilities, appropriating especially the concept of the “actant.”

Bennett sees and respects the “negative power” of objects – their “refus[al] to dissolve completely into the milieu of human knowledge.”<sup>47</sup> What “actant” signifies, however, is the object’s simultaneous ability to engender effects: it hinges on the argument that the halcyon existence of the object does not preclude its ability to assert itself in the world. It is simply a source of action that “implies no special motivation of human individual actors, nor of humans in general.”<sup>48</sup> This term she uses in conjunction with “operator,” a word to designate one of the more specialized ways in which we use the word “agent”: as a catalyst, something that becomes a “decisive force” in the occurrence of an event based on the fortuity of it being in “the right place at the right time.”<sup>49</sup> What these additions to our vocabulary afford us is a manner of speaking that is more conducive to perceiving and thus cognizing objects as something more than we think of them in our everyday lives. Without losing their sense of ineffability, they also “shimmer and spark” in a new

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46. Bennett, 69.

47. *Ibid.*, 3.

48. *Ibid.*, 9.

49. *Ibid.*

light – a light that permits them to appear as “vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics.”<sup>50</sup> They achieve “thing-power”: “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle,”<sup>51</sup> and in so doing, “exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness... a perhaps small *but irreducible* degree of independence from the words, images, and feelings they provoke in us [my emphasis].”<sup>52</sup> It is this attitude that encapsulates the spirit of what Bennett coins *vital materialism* – a materialism that, without slipping into the hokum of intellectual tassology, acknowledges that *je ne sais quoi* that permeates all taxonomies in its “differential distribut[ion] across a wider range of ontological types.”<sup>53</sup>

Absent of concrete explanation (especially pertinent given the subject at hand), this formulation runs the risk of sounding more like empty rhetoric than substantiated arguments. But Bennett is careful to always suffuse her theoretical exegesis with applied examples. True, these examples at times toe the line between rationalism and quasi-mysticism. Perhaps the clearest instance of such quasi-mysticism crops up in her recounting of an experience at a storm drain on Cold Spring Lane, where she articulates her personal account of a lived experience of the phenomenon of thing-power (which I will quote, given its narrative structure, at length):

On a sunny Tuesday afternoon 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:

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50. *Ibid.*, 5.

51. *Ibid.*, 6.

52. *Ibid.*, *xvi*.

53. *Ibid.*, 9.

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 – between, on the one hand, stuff to ignore, except insofar as it betokened human activity (the workman's efforts, the litterer's toss, the rat-poisoner's success), and, on the other hand, stuff that commanded attention in its own right, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects. In the second moment, stuff exhibited its thing-power: it issues a call, even if I did not quite understand what it was saying. At the very least, it provoked affects in me: 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. . . . I achieved, for a moment, what Thoreau had made his life's goal: to be able, as Thomas Dumm puts it, "to be surprised by what we see."<sup>54</sup>

There is no questioning the fact that this description, which she uses early in the work to introduce the reader to the sentiment behind her work, is a far cry from traditional argumentative writing – whether this be in her home discipline of political science or in a philosophical text. Its diction is pointedly evocative, even poignant: objects "shimmy," "provoke," and "call," and her descriptive cataloguing of the material components of this

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54. Ibid., 4-5; Thomas Dumm, *A Politics of the Ordinary* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 7.

assemblage of items and its marked emphasis of the *singularity* of each constituent part gives it a feeling comparable to a still life painting, whose careful, exclusive attentiveness to the mundane makes every object (metaphorically, but at times literally) *glow*. Its function seems decidedly aesthetic. While this does fall under the general category of axiology, the treatment of values here is distinctly different than that of ethics. The ultimate effect is the impression of objects as something beautiful, ineffable, and impregnated with a mysterious agency: it is not hard to see why the accusation of mysticism might arise.<sup>55</sup>

In response to this accusation, however, I feel that there are two particularly important points to be made. The first is: unconventional projects sometimes require unconventional means. As is generally a good rule of thumb, it is always best to choose a tool well-suited to the job at hand, and given that Bennett's project falls somewhat outside of the realm of normalcy, it makes sense that her strategy should reflect that. This is a conscious decision on her part, in alignment with her belief that "[w]hat seems to be needed is a certain willingness to appear naïve or foolish" in order to "describe without thereby erasing the independence of things."<sup>56</sup> Bennett is certainly not the first scholar who, disenchanted with the strictures placed (explicitly or normatively) on thought by a scientific mode of discourse, has resorted to what might be seen as eccentricity (both in the sense informed by common parlance [strangeness] and the sense informed by etymology [being *ekkentros*, or out of center]). In her own treatise on thingness, Freya Mathews, for example, speaks out about her experiences wherein "[f]rom the viewpoint of Western thought in general, the idea of a world alive with meanings of its own appeared atavistic, a throwback to a primitive anthropomorphic realism that had been

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55. "Mysterious agency" is indeed a critical part of the standard definition of "mysticism": Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "mysticism," accessed December 14, 2014, <http://www.oed.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/view/Entry/124654>.

56. Bennett, *xiii*.

superseded and invalidated both by scientific culture and by the epistemological insights of modern philosophy.”<sup>57</sup> This critical reception of her scholarly interests, however, does not detain her, and her work skirts this problem by at times adopting a more aesthetic approach to articulating its positions. It sets up new (or, perhaps more accurately, merely customized) terms for new intellectual territory, “bring[ing] together the philosophical and poetic influences personified in Schopenhauer and Morris respectively, to show how it is possible rationally to transcend the metaphysical presuppositions of modern civilization and arrive at the threshold of a new, poetic, relation to the world.”<sup>58</sup> It is with this end goal of a more poetic sensibility that Mathews can speak of, for example, how it was “a confluence of love and metaphysics [that] broke the surface of experience in a particularly pure fount of enchantment in that interlude in the bluebell cottage with Schopenhauer.”<sup>59</sup>

But, to move on to our second point, neither Bennett nor Mathews take this challenge as antagonistic, and their methods for overcoming their pragmatic challenges take advantage of the intellectual goods offered by the very bodies of knowledge that pose these challenges. Mathews contends quite strongly that

[t]he epistemological claims of science cannot be dismissed with an airy, post-Enlightenment wave of the hand. Every time we step onto an airplane or type our thoughts into a word processor, speak on the phone or shop in a supermarket, we bear witness to our tacit faith in the terms of the modern episteme. The chic epistemological relativism of postmodern culture is belied by these acts. *Any new metaphysical orientation to which we aspire must, in the end, be consistent with*

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57. Freya Mathews, *For Love of Matter: A Contemporary Panpsychism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 3.

58. *Ibid.*, 17.

59. *Ibid.*, 16.

*the evidence of science and with the requirements of reason, even if it in turn throws doubt on the ethics of prevailing forms of scientific rationalism and suggests new modalities of inquiry [my emphasis].*<sup>60</sup>

We see this two-pronged approach as a constant, considered back-and-forth in Bennett's text. Her interest in Deleuzian assemblages, for example, is grounded in a scientific interest in topics such as dietary impacts on moods and cognitive dispositions. Yes, the pervasiveness of the concept of assemblages in her work points to the fact that the idea alone must hold some amount of intellectual grip for her. But the notion of *ad hoc* collections of forces – fluctuating but functioning, coming together and breaking apart through processes of de- and re-territorialization<sup>61</sup> – is never invoked as idle talk; it is always put to work in the service of explaining objective phenomena. In the case of food, for example, the concept of the assemblage highlights how “a small change in eater-eaten complex may issue in a significant disruption of its pattern or function,” and “[t]he assemblage in which persons and fats are participants is perhaps better figured as a nonlinear system.”<sup>62</sup> Food, as an actant contributing to a larger assemblage, embodies her notion of vital materialism in its ability to produce surprising and difficult-to-circumscribe effects, but this does not preclude its simultaneous analysis as part of a process that can be scientifically rationalized. Or, we might instead turn to her explanation of the 2003 blackout, in which approximately 50 million people were affected by the shutting down of over 100 power plants. Bennett is intrigued by descriptions of the event that characterize it as a kind of sublime and animate act performed by a vast network of both material and immaterial forces, acting in unison: she quotes the *International Herald Tribune*'s anthropomorphic description of the affair, in

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60. *Ibid.*, 6.

61. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 97-98.

62. Bennett, 42.

which “the grid’s heart fluttered... complicated beyond all understanding, even by experts – [the grid] lives and occasionally dies by its own mysterious rules.”<sup>63</sup> Yet, at the same time, this account is heavily informed by technical explications on the transmission of active and reactive power, in addition to maintenance and operation procedures, equipment limitations, infrastructure exploitation, regulatory standards, consumer demand, *etc.* This considerate treatment is not the work of someone who denigrates causal explanation in favour of mysticism.

If we can accept Bennett’s unorthodox strategy and respect her underlying appreciation of the contributions of more straightforwardly scientific attitude, what, then, are we left with? To recapitulate: our objective is to find a new way of speaking about materiality that might – akin to postmodern theatrical devices – alienate ourselves from intuitive attitudes. Our inheritance as human beings (or, arguably, as organic matter) is a kind of perception that is fundamentally attuned to the actions that our bodies, as our means of engaging the world, can enact through our interaction with it. The solution, for Bennett, is to revisit this notion of agency, “turn[ing] the figures of ‘life’ and ‘matter’ around and around, worrying them until they start to seem strange, in something like the way a common word when repeated can become a foreign, nonsense sound.”<sup>64</sup> Our ideal is somewhat akin to a selective aphasia; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his discussion of the aphasiac patient, uses a very similar description to describe his subject, for whom the word “is no longer useful... it says nothing to him, it is bizarre and absurd, just as names are for us when we have repeated them for too long.”<sup>65</sup> But this objective, if explicit, is still vague. It is one thing to, by swapping or altering theoretical lenses, attempt to craft

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63. James Glanz, “When the Grid Bites Back: More are Relying on an Unreliable System,” *International Herald Tribune*, August 18, 2003.

64. Bennett, *vii*.

65. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 99.

an academic argument for why we ought to do something differently and thus better. It is quite another to extend this academic argument into an inevitably livable precept for the greater public. In addition to a manifesto and a general strategy, we need realizable goals and steps to achieve them. Shy of this, no amount of theorizing will be able to offer ethico-political traction.

Unfortunately, *this* is where Bennett's account struggles to deliver. It is its evanescence – its quality of being “too close and too fugitive, as much wind as thing, impetus as entity” – that challenges the task at hand, and thus to which we must now turn our attention.<sup>66</sup> Bennett herself realizes the difficulty of what she is asking, and offers a number of suggestions, lest her treatise be taken as a meritorious idea that (to borrow from Hume's classic skeptical critique) “can so little serve to any serious purpose.”<sup>67</sup> Each of these suggestions, however, comes with its unique ethico-political problems in tow. We might look into the possibility of *elision*: more specifically, the modification of discourse on human subjectivity and interiority so as to suspend or radically reduce its uptake.<sup>68</sup> We might frame this as a kind of recognition of the power of *aletheia*: the unconcealment (*aletheia*) that simultaneously conditions the possibility of concealment, in this case the light that – being cast upon the subject – condemns the object to the realm of shadow. However, if we (as Bennett does) see agency as existing as a kind of spectrum between subjects and objects with different types of responsibility that accord to different degrees of agency, we can recognize that there are unique ethical obligations for the subject. To suspend discourse on those qualities of the subject that grant it these unique obligations seems like a recipe for disaster. We are, after all, only very recently beginning to make reparations for many massive oversights, and have yet to significantly acknowledge many

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66. *Ibid.*, 119.

67. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Mineola: Dover, 2004), 100.

68. Bennett, 120.

that still exist. Alternately, we might look into the possibility of anthropomorphization. While this strategy has the virtue of coming quite naturally to us, it seems unlikely that an act of self-aggrandization will do much to foster humility toward our ontological place in the world and our epistemological capacities, never mind inflate our notions of thing-power. This is in addition to the risks that we would face regarding superstition, divinization, and romanticism, which Bennett is right to address as not inconsequential.<sup>69</sup>

What vital materialism ultimately fails to do, to come back full circle, is to provide us with a mechanism whereby we can (without a prohibitive ethical penalty) imagine that there is not some gulf between what Bennett terms the “its” and the “mes” – something that we can ultimately trace back to our own biocentrism (including but not limited to our anthropocentrism). Bennett identifies correctly the difficulties of action-oriented perception, and can overcome the problems of navigating language and scholarly territory through her use of Latour, but cannot quite put into flight a practice that would mitigate its effect on our understanding of object without coming at too high of a cost. We have very little to fight with in our uphill battle against action-oriented perception and our own natural conceit as a species (and as organic beings). As a consequence, the best the would-be vital materialist can do is try – exhaustively, constantly, and with little but the force of will to aid them and against the invisible powers of cultural beliefs – is to cultivate a sensitivity to things so that, in time, this form of self-aware reflection might come to be habitual. But is there not some easier way to persist with our endeavour? Must we resort to archaic thought-stopping techniques, or is there some other means to re-orient ourselves toward the world that does not require a concerted effort at the storm drain on Cold Spring Lane?

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69. Ibid.

### 3 The “Hegemony of Skin and Skull”<sup>70</sup>

When I was about three years old, I fell off of a Little Tikes Playcenter and broke two bones in my arm. Accompanying this first demonstration of my truly regrettable lack of refinement in motor skills was my very first memory of pain. Staring up at the sky with the white clouds drifting lazily by – it was a beautiful summer day, despite some scattered sun showers which nearly proved to be my demise – my first impression was of a vague and unarticulated sense of indignation at the massive discrepancy between this glorious, cornflower blue sky and my sudden and terrible misfortune. Very shortly thereafter, there was the hysteria of pain. I was inconsolable. One hospital trip and a very large cast later, I was given Gruffy: a stuffed goat with a tightly-curved bounty of hair and stretchy leather horns that were perfect to chew. From that night until a night far off in the future, when I deemed the stuffed animal too “childish,” Gruffy accompanied me to bed, where I would hold him close and remember the way that my generally imperious mother had rushed frantically to my side as I stared uncomprehendingly at that unfairly blue sky. He was a precious comfort to me.

Thinking back to Gruffy, I have a strong sense of his ineffable importance. He seems to signify something more than the scraps of cotton batting and synthetic hair that make up his physical form. Yet I struggle to think of him as being in any way *agentic*. Following Bennett’s lead, I can try to think of him as an actant: something that generates effects. I can certainly localize a number of phenomena that link up directly to my experience of him: my relationship with Gruffy, sustained for decades at this point, naturally evokes a wide swathe of affective responses, which in turn can be traced to memories of his presence throughout my childhood (the security implied by my mother’s concern, for instance). But this response does not seem quite appropriate in terms of Bennett’s ideals,

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70. Andy Clark and David Chalmers, “The Extended Mind,” *Analysis* 58, no. 1 (1998): 18.

either. The discarded bottle cap at Cold Spring Lane did not need to borrow its vitality from, say, the lips of a thirsty marathon-runner who, in the desperation of the final stretch, carelessly flung her waste to the ground. For Bennett, there is an *intrinsic* vitality to which she attributes a large measure of value. If we seek this value, we need to look for it in precisely those qualities that I first framed as the most base form of his significance: his cotton batting and synthetic hair. More than this: it must be his cotton batting *qua* material substance, his synthetic hair *qua* material substance that informs our search. We are not doing Gruffy justice if, for example, we consider him only as he “betoken[s] human activity” (the product of labour, the embodiment of technological advances, *etc.*).<sup>71</sup> We must, like studious ethologists, observe under natural conditions and with an open comportment in the hopes that, like a previously-unobserved trait in an animal species, vibrant matter will issue a declaration to the patient observer.

For some – those amenable to the re-enchantment of the world, for instance, or those attuned to poetic observation – this task is not an impossibility. For others, such an undertaking would be as difficult as it was absurd. Furthermore, we must note that one – alas – cannot remain a poet all the day long, and thoughts of Gruffy as, say, an element of our material environment that exerts an influence on mental states (and thus behavior) must soon be subsumed by his classification as clutter, his utility as a comfort-device, *etc.* If we were to construct an economy of attention, we might say that the cost of such an attitude (measured in the currency of time) is too high for a payoff that is too low: an evanescent appreciation.

It seems that we must return, at least temporarily, to the drawing board. While the *spirit* of Bennett’s text is in line with our own, we need to find a perspective that has both intellectual *and pragmatic* traction, and while we have not come across any reason to cast doubt on the ontological and epistemological arguments embedded in Bennett’s vital materialism, we also have not found a way to transform them into livable principles. In

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71. Bennett, 4.

order to rectify this omission, I would like to propose that the extended mind theory provides a starting point to engaging, supplementing, and deploying Bennett's ideas without compromising their integrity.

What is the extended mind theory, and how can it offer us these riches? As an argument originating from a desire to expand our notions of cognitive processes, it is a fair assessment to say that extended mind theory is for us a strange bedfellow. However, if we turn to Andy Clark and David Chalmers' seminal paper on the topic, "The Extended Mind," we might break open a discussion on how we get from point A (the central, even defining, thesis of extended mind theory) to point B (our current practical challenges) with a single quotation. This excerpt from Clark and Chalmers' paper is (quite agreeably for us) pointedly prescriptive: "epistemic action," they suggest, "demands spread of *epistemic credit*."<sup>72</sup> This comment could use some unassembling, but comes ready-made with all of the components required for our current objective. In using the term "epistemic action," Clark and Chalmers are referring to an action taken in the world that serves a specific type of useful purpose. Distinguished from *pragmatic* action, which is an action taken to enact a physical change that is useful for its *own* sake (they use the example of filling in a hole in a leaky dam), *epistemic* action enacts this physical change for the express purpose of assisting with *cognitive processes* (we might think of spraypainting a symbol on this dam to mark it for – and thus remember it in the context of – later repairs).<sup>73</sup> "Epistemic credit" is more straightforward, simply gesturing toward the general maxim to "give credit where credit is due." In other words, the motivation that drives Clark and Chalmers' paper is the belief that the work that *x* does in contributing to our epistemic faculties or capabilities should be reflected in its appreciation as something having epistemic worth.

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72. Clark and Chalmers, 8.

73. Ibid.

The road from here is slightly clearer. What sort of things, then, can be seen as doing epistemic work? According to Clark and Chalmers, the answer to this question needs to account for the way in which cognitive processes can operate through one's physical environment in a manner that is analogous to the way that cognitive processes occur internally, creating a "coupled system" that can be understood as a stand-alone cognitive system. Furthermore, it should then consider the degree to which these cognitive processes can have a relationship with the mind. If we consider these issues thoroughly, they argue, we will find that reasons for distinguishing between wholly internal cognitive processing and processing that relies on external objects are only superficial,<sup>74</sup> as are the reasons for distinguishing between certain belief states that arise as a result of these corresponding forms of cognitive processing.<sup>75</sup> As a consequence, then, we ought to consider the mind to be, in a sense, "extended": the demarcations of skin and skull as the enclosure in which the mind resides no longer seem supportable.<sup>76</sup> As Clark and Chalmers put it, "[c]ognitive processes ain't [all] in the head,"<sup>77</sup> and (slightly stronger)

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74. Clark and Chalmers, 8.

75. *Ibid.*, 13.

76. Given that we have already broached the possibility of accusations of mysticism in this project, it is worth pointing out that some would not only see an extended approach as immune to such criticisms, but would attribute mysticism to the more traditional notion of enclosed thought; Ludwig Wittgenstein, for instance, once commented that "[t]he idea of thinking as a process in the head, in a completely enclosed space, gives him something *occult* [my emphasis]." See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, bilingual ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 106.

77. Clark and Chalmers., 8.

“the mind extends into the world.”<sup>78</sup> Ultimately, these arguments can be merged to explain what they call “active externalism,” their position which argues for the *active* role of the *external* environment in inner (i.e. mental) processes. This is not just a causal thesis, but a constitutive one: the world does not merely impinge upon the mind’s processes, but *is part* of the mind’s processes.<sup>79</sup>

These positions are most clearly illustrated with the use of examples, which – in virtue of the broad nature of the thesis – are ample. Take, for instance, a map. A map is a visual representation of a space that expresses a certain kind (or kinds) of information about that space; often, the most pertinent information is the relationship between isolatable parts of this space (i.e. the road map, which indicates how to get from *x* to *y* via transportation routes, or the political map, which highlights boundaries and major cities), but it can also pertain to other physical properties like the terrain (i.e. the physical map) or natural resources (i.e. the economic map). For each of these types of map, I could be a specialist with all of the requisite knowledge to complete a task at hand without consulting the relevant information contained within the map. If I was, for example, a truck driver, I may have an excellent knowledge of the relationship between locations (i.e. the information disclosed by a road map or political map); if I was a physical geographer, I may have accumulated extensive knowledge of the terrain of a region (i.e. the information disclosed by a physical map); if I was an expert in environmental resource management, I may be aware of the natural resources of a particular region (i.e. the information disclosed by an economic map).

Now, if in each of these situations, I have forgotten the pertinent map at home, I might simply close my eyes and recall the information through memory (situation 1). The truck driver may close his eyes and picture the winding route he takes to destination *x* in order

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78. *Ibid.*, 12.

79. Richard Menary, “Introduction: The Extended Mind in Focus,” in *The Extended Mind*, ed. Richard Menary (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 2.

to recall the relative position of destination *y*; the physical geographer may close his eyes and cobble together some geographical features of the region, patching them together in order to assess the probable highest point of elevation in the city from which to take a photograph; the environmental resource management specialist may think back to the raw exports of a region to determine the nature of the local job market. In this case, we can consider the cognitive act entirely internal. Alternately, it might be the case that the map is in the glove compartment in front of me. I could simply use recall, as in the previous example, but for each specialist, it is quicker and more reliable to defer to the map (which gives me instantaneous and precise data on the routes between locations, the local terrain, and regional resources).<sup>80</sup> The reasonable outcome here is that I utilize the (external) map to solve the (internally-sourced) cognitive puzzle (situation 2). Finally, to end on a speculative note (as Clark and Chalmers themselves do), we can imagine a situation in which I (again) can use recall, but this same map – through the intervention of some kind of assistive technology (e.g. a neural implant) – is fully accessible through the brain itself and *only* the brain itself (perhaps through a cognitive enhancement device that allows me to have a true photographic memory). Here, I should again consult the map, yet this internal process seems somehow in a liminal space between internality and externality (situation 3). It can hardly be said that I am engaging my environment in order to come to an answer: I could complete this entire process with all of my senses extinguished (assuming that, being internal, the map's representation is extra-sensory). Yet this mental map seems less straightforwardly internal. How do we tackle the question of how each of these situations significantly differ from each other, in terms of internality and externality?

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80. Clark and Chalmers pause on the advantages of such a deferral, since it fashions yet another link between the mind and the environment, given that the removal of an environmental aid would here be akin to removing a part of the brain in terms of a decrease in competence. See Clark and Chalmers, 9.

For Clark and Chalmers, the answer is straightforward: there *is* no significant difference. If we continue labelling these situations 1, 2, and 3 respectively, then we might say:

if 1 = internal, and

3 = 1, then

3 = internal, and

if 2 = 3, then

2 = internal

Or, conversely:

if 2 = external, and

3 = 2, then

3 = external, and

if 1 = 3, then

1 = external

Clearly, something is amiss here. Accessing an external map (2) does not seem internal, nor does accessing internal memories (1) seem external. So our problems seem to be rooted in the following elements of each formulation:

if 1 = internal (✓), and

3 = 1 (✓), then

3 = internal (✓), and

**if 2 = 3, then**

**2 = internal**

Or:

if 2 = external (✓), and

3 = 2 (✓), then

3 = external (✓), and

**if 1 = 3, then**

**1 = external**

The problem, we can see, stems from 3, which has parallels with both 1 and 2. Starting with the first formulation: 1 (accessing internal memories) is internal, and appears to not be significantly different from 3 (accessing the map through neural implant) – after all, it is all inside the head. 2 (accessing an external map) also appears to not be significantly different from 3 (accessing the map through neural implant) – after all, both situations involve consulting a map. As a consequence, 2 (accessing an external map) appears to not be significantly different than 1 (accessing internal memories) – which is internal. We can run through this again with our second formulation: 2 (accessing an external map) is external, and appears to not be significantly different than 3 (accessing the map through neural implant) – after all, both situations involve consulting a map. 1 (accessing internal memories) also appears to not be significantly different from 3 (accessing the map through a neural implant) – after all, it is all inside the head. As a consequence, 1 (accessing internal memories) appears to not be significantly different than 2 (accessing an external map) – which is external. In short, it appears that what must be done to resolve this paradox is to decide whether or not 3 is fundamentally external or internal – but the only way to do so is to draw a firm conclusion on whether accessing an internal map through neural implant is most like accessing internal memories or accessing an external map, which would require the answer to the significance between the internal/external demarcations. Since that is in fact the question under examination, a failure to provide this answer without recourse to the internal/external distinction itself is to beg the question. Unable to find a convincing answer, Clark and Chalmers thus decree that the distinction between purely internal cognitive processes and coupled systems

(with both internal and external elements) are false: “[a]ll the components in the system play an active causal role, and they jointly govern behavior in the same sort of way that cognition usually does”; for this reason, “this sort of coupled process counts equally well as a cognitive process, whether or not it is wholly in the head.”<sup>81</sup>

Clark and Chalmers move forward by arguing that this collapsing of internality and externality in cognitive processing has wider repercussions than just changes to explanatory methods in cognitive theory. If we take a step further, we can see that belief states that arise as a result of active externalism suggest that not just cognitive processing, but *mental states* can be extended outward. If we return to our map example, we might explain this fairly easily. In consulting my map, I am a testament to the claim that cognitive processing can take place as part of a coupled system, and that this cognitive processing takes place outside the arbitrary boundary of my head. If we look beyond process at outcomes, however, the end result of this consultation is a *belief*: this is no longer a matter of cognitive processing, but of a mental state. After consulting my map, I *believe* that I can take Water Street to get to the Planet Bakery; I *believe* that my best vantage point for a photograph is at Tower Hill, part of the local drumlin field; I *believe* that the economy is dominated by industry rather than natural resource exportation. My belief is thus bound up with this external item, just as belief can be bound up with internal memory. While it may seem counterintuitive to say that a belief can be located in a material thing, we can again point to a lack of fundamental difference between a commonsense approach (e.g. that cognitive processes are internal, or that beliefs are held only by subjects) and an extended approach (e.g. that cognitive processes can be constituted externally, or that beliefs can be embodied by objects).

In the event that I access internal memories (situation 1), the distance between my desire to have knowledge and the actual possession of knowledge is always mediated by the process of recall, and I find my belief in my memories. If I access a map (situation 2),

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81. Ibid., 8-9.

there is also a distance between my desire to have knowledge and the actual possession of knowledge: this distance is mediated by the process of consultation, and I find my belief in the map. The only difference is this internal/external distinction, which we previously assessed as being insignificant.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, if we say that, in situation 1, I have a *belief* from the outset that I can take Water Street, I ought to take my photograph from Tower Hill, or that the local job market is industry-based, we also ought to say the same of situation 2. Clark and Chalmers point out that to require one to say that one consulted the map *and then* had a belief would be on par with requiring one to say that one consulted their memory *and then* had a belief, which they describe as “one step too many... pointlessly complex.”<sup>83</sup> We use a form of shorthand and say that one has a belief even before consulting memory because we recognize that there are such things as non-occurrent beliefs – beliefs that are held despite not being consciously deliberated at the present moment.<sup>84</sup> Unless we restrict beliefs to those that are being actively entertained, it makes sense to say that one has a belief that is located in an object.

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82. Some scholars, such as Richard Menary, point out that there *is* a distinction to be made here: in remembering a location, I am remembering (recall > knowledge); in accessing a map, I am remembering that there is information that I need in the map, then remembering the actual information (recall > second recall > knowledge) – I do not, in the first case, need to remember *that* I remember. However, while this sounds damning, it does not reflect how individuals engage with many everyday objects. I do not, for example, feel my glasses slide down my nose, remember that I can see more clearly and be more comfortable if they are fully pushed up, then accordingly push them up: this action is so “old hat” that it is unthinking. Similarly, we might think of using a map in each case as so natural as to be an unthinking response. We thus do not need to remember that we remember. See Menary, 10.

83. Clark and Chalmers, 13.

84. *Ibid.*, 12.

If we accept the extended mind theory, what tools can it give us to help reorient modes of thought around matter? Clark and Chalmers' final section of the text, "Beyond the Outer Limits," summarizes this best in a short question of their own: "What, finally, of the self? Does the extended mind imply an extended self? It seems so. Most of us already accept that the self outstrips the boundaries of consciousness; my dispositional beliefs, for example, constitute in some deep sense part of who I am. If so, *then these boundaries may also fall beyond the skin* [my emphasis]."<sup>85</sup> It is this idea of the self outstripping the boundaries of consciousness that most appeals to us. Bennett's project has confronted us with a number of difficulties that have so far been beyond our powers to rectify: anthropocentrism and action-oriented perception and their effects on our ability to cultivate an appropriate attitude toward matter are the primary obstacles. Her response – to either mute the subject or personify the object – comes at too high of an ethico-political price. Using Clark and Chalmers' account of the extended mind, however, we may be able to find a loophole. If we think of our material *milieu* as memory, can we not have an easier time cultivating such an attitude? If so, are there any concessions that we might need to make to our objectives in order to attain a workable approach?

Several things need to be said off the bat. First, what Clark and Chalmers argue is *not* that the world exists merely as a kind of congealed memory. To get from active externalism to a memory-oriented account of matter will require a certain amount of theoretical lilypadding. Their own claims are much more measured: that cognition and limited aspects of the mind might be said to exist in the exterior world. There are two significant ways in which their arguments in fact cause some amount of friction with our own tentative framework. First, while the attention that Clark and Chalmers draw to the difference between cognition and the mind is done with the intention of ultimately constructing their argument in steps – first laying the groundwork with extended cognition, then building on this groundwork to establish extended mind – these steps are tentative and partial, and they leave many of the implications unaddressed. Before

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85. *Ibid.*, 8.

arguing that mind can inhere within objects, for example, they list in passing several different aspects of the mind that are *not* covered in cognition: beliefs, but also experiences, desires, and emotions.<sup>86</sup> Their argument, however, only concerns belief. More than this, it only concerns *some* beliefs, or rather beliefs that have been arrived at in a certain manner: beliefs arising from external features that “drive” cognitive processing in a particular way.<sup>87</sup> This account, while no doubt an effort to create a significant shift in thinking, remains heavily qualified, and we have no particular interest in belief *per se* – only *per accidens*, as it pertains to memory (which occurs at the crossroads of experience and belief). Memory itself never arises specifically in their work.

Secondly, and arguably more importantly, Clark and Chalmers’ account is irremediably immersed in the subjective perspective. One would be perfectly correct in pointing out that their position ascribes value to the external environment in virtue of its role in cognition and belief states, but this value is always funneled through the subject in a way that detracts from its utility for our project. To say that it is self-interested is not an insurmountable problem: we have recognized that a view from nowhere is impossible, and that having “human interest” does not in principle preclude a genuine, good faith effort to do service to the materiality under discussion. But the methodology that Clark and Chalmers employ is a *unidirectional* extension of human operations and states to non-human materials. In response to criticisms of their theory, they have gone so far as to say that reference to an object’s cognitive quality is nothing more than “stylistic infelicity,” and that to see an object as a “self-contained locus of thinking” is an “absurdity.”<sup>88</sup> Such a methodology and concomitant commitments cannot help but to

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86. Ibid.

87. Ibid., 12.

88. Andy Clark, “Coupling, Constitution, and the Cognitive Kind: A Reply to Adams and Aizawa,” in *The Extended Mind*, ed. Richard Menary (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 83.

undermine any attempt to establish a unique quiddity for the object: cognition and belief states are merely “borrowed” attributes. If the argument was expanded to, for instance, illustrate that something intrinsic to the external environment played an inevitable role in human cognition and belief states, this would be quite different: we would be forced to acknowledge this environment as a ground of possibility for processes that have traditionally been held as exclusive and fundamentally characterizing human traits. We would not be applying the human to the environment, but rather finding the human to be already unconsciously dwelling *in* the environment. The arguments that we employed previously to explain the collapse of the internal/external distinction, however, are ample evidence that no such argument is being made here. Since it is possible to have cognitive processes and belief states that are wholly internal (e.g. situation 1), there is no relationship of dependence, only a kind of symbiotic complementarity. If we are to find what we are looking for, we must adapt this framework to allow for the dignity of quiddity for the object.

Before turning to our section on phenomenology proper, I would like to borrow a quotation from Maurice Merleau-Ponty to suggest a way that we might adapt this framework. “[T]he object,” Merleau-Ponty states, “is seen from all times just as it is seen from all places, and by the same means, namely, the horizon structure. The present still holds in the hand the immediate past, but without positing it as an object, and since this immediate past likewise retained the past that immediately preceded it, time gone by is entirely taken up and grasped in the present.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, what Merleau-Ponty seems to be gesturing toward is the fact that the object is immanently tied to its own historicity – that there is something in the nature of materiality that possesses a palimpsest quality, a “memory” of things previous. To say that an object might be characterized by memory may *prima facie* seem to be simply a slip-up, having forgotten for a moment our protestations against the reasons why anthropomorphization is a bad idea (self-aggrandization, superstition, divinization, romanticization, *etc.*). But we might

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89. Merleau-Ponty, 71.

simply point out that, if we can successfully argue that the essence of the object is its memory-quality, then seeing this as an act of anthropomorphization is nothing more than an act of hubris. The fact that memory is *traditionally* considered to be a subjective experience may incline us to think that it is intrinsic to our mental faculties, but it could be the case that this is simply the very sort of symbiotic complementarity that we discussed above in the context of cognition and belief states, but with the roles reversed.

Such a perspective is not without precedents. If we look further into Chalmers' work, for instance, we can see that he picks up the thread of the extended mind in relation to the notion of *experience*. The best way to broach this subject seems to be by entering through his discussion of the intrinsic properties of physicality. Things, Chalmers argues, are determined by their relations to other things, both at the most macro and micro levels.<sup>90</sup> This is not meant to be taken as a grand existential statement about self-constitution and the Other, but rather the way that we understand and describe matter. Properties that we think of as being a fundamental possession of matter can be accurately understood as simply relational properties as applied to singular material instantiations. When we think of the mass of *x*, for instance, we think that this is a fundamental property of *x*: if my mass is 115 pounds, then I possess the fundamental property of having a mass of 115 pounds. While this is not exactly *untrue*, however, it is simply a different (more intuitive) way of expressing a more technical fact: that my mass of 115 pounds determines the relative strength of my gravitational attraction to other bodies. The meaningful content of the concept of mass is essentially relational. The same can be said of smaller objects like particles.

Now, as Chalmers sees it, the idea of the fundamental nature of physicality as being devoid of intrinsic properties – the world as “pure causal flux, with no further properties

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90. David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 153.

for the causation to relate” – is not exactly intuitive.<sup>91</sup> Such an idea imparts a sensation of metaphysical kenosis: in a world where the foundation of the world is simply an infinite process of deferral between coexisting bodies, the domain of ontology appears to be the phenomenology of the mirage. If we want the world to have *substance*, we need to locate these intrinsic properties; the only access that we have to them, however, is through intrinsic *phenomenal* properties (qualia) – properties as they appear to us through experience. Chalmers admits that it is beyond question that the leap from phenomenal properties as our mode of engaging the world to phenomenal properties as being somehow intrinsic properties of the physical is arbitrary – another form, perhaps, of Maslow’s hammer. However, he makes a good point that if we have no real idea of what we are looking for, any theory is hypothetically as good as any other – so the notion is, at very least, worth entertaining. The question, then, is this: how would an intrinsically phenomenal account of the physical *work*?

Such an account, he rightly points out, smacks of a degree of panpsychism. If phenomenal properties inhere in the object, we are suggesting that the object is essentially phenomenal and we simply lack the faculties to appreciate it – like a sound, forever broadcasting just beyond our register, that is clear as a bell to a dog. Chalmers’ first response is, to use an apt metaphor, to switch (scopic) lenses: descend a level. Rather than consider phenomenal qualities of the physical, consider *protophenomenal* qualities of the physical. If protophenomenal properties inhere in an object, we are suggesting that the object is essentially characterized by properties that *can jointly* collaborate in such a way that they produce phenomenal effects – like being able to see the finished cake, *if the ingredients come together*, yet never knowing that it is the end result of the collusion of egg, flour, sugar, *etc.* Such an idea is still difficult to conceive of, naturally, since none of our standard physical properties can wield any explanatory power in this account, but it

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91. Ibid.

“cannot be ruled out *a priori*.”<sup>92</sup> The payoff would, furthermore, be great: a tidy contribution to our understanding of causation. “If there are intrinsic properties of the physical,” Chalmers explains, “it is instantiations of these properties that physical causation ultimately relates. If these are phenomenal properties, then there is phenomenal causation; and if these are protophenomenal properties, then phenomenal properties inherit causal relevance by their supervenient status, just as billiard balls inherit causal relevance from molecules.”<sup>93</sup> Intrinsic protophenomenal qualities could thus accrue in such a way as to explain our own phenomenal experiences. This conversation cannot thus simply be relegated to an idle but ineffectual curiosity, for “the phenomenology of experience in human agents may inherit causal relevance from the causal role of the intrinsic properties of the physical.”<sup>94</sup>

The major problem that we have glossed over here seems prominent. We want to motivate causation and save the substantial world by positing intrinsic physical qualities; we propose either phenomenal or protophenomenal qualities. But, as mentioned previously, Chalmers is forced to admit that such a conception *cannot* be understood within our current pool of physical properties. If there is an intrinsic phenomenal or protophenomenal quality to the object, it may as well be adamantium. Have we reached an impasse in terms of our attempt to adapt Clark and Chalmers’ framework of the extended mind?

By introducing the notion of memory into the conversation, I would like to argue that it is possible to locate just this intrinsic property that Chalmers seeks in physical mutability. By highlighting parallels between intellectual (subjective) memory and physical (objective) mutability, we can see how we can craft a position whereby we fulfill our

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92. Ibid., 154.

93. Ibid.

94. Ibid.

earlier requirements to a) get at the object proper in a manner that allows us to b) investigate its intrinsic value without c) failing to respect its quiddity or d) prioritizing our self-interest or e) submitting to our own biophilia. If we can forge an argument that strengthens the consanguinity between these two versions of memory, we can a) access the object *in* its capacity as an object, and in so doing, b) accord it proper recognition for c) its originary work in enabling the construction of memory, a theory that d) in no way advantages or e) glorifies our own position in the world.

The easiest entry point into the discussion may simply to be to frame this idea as simply the recognition of an oversight in Clark and Chalmers' account. Situations 1, 2, and 3: Clark and Chalmers ultimately argue that, although each of these circumstances involves interacting with the environment in a certain way, the differences in these interactions are insignificant. We might point out, from a strictly empirical standpoint, that even the most internal of these circumstances (situation 1) is embedded in external data (i.e. intellectual processes are built on a foundation of an embodied and thus physical existence, since internal representations make reference to previous external referents). Furthermore, these intellectual processes – as Clark himself articulates – are evolved responses to environmental puzzles.<sup>95</sup> We can then use this observation to build up our argument that links this intellectual quality *inextricably* to the material. In a follow-up to his and Chalmers' landmark article, Clark responds to an inquiry about the role of coupled systems by commenting that coupling is not supposed to render the object cognitive, but rather to make it part of a cognitive system: it is “to make some object, that in and of itself is not usefully (perhaps not even intelligibly) thought of as *either cognitive or non-cognitive*, into a *proper part of some cognitive system*, such as a human agent.”<sup>96</sup> I intend to challenge – by worrying relevant conceptual terminology – the unintelligibility of a

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95. Andy Clark, *Being There: Putting Brain, Body, and World Together Again* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), *xii*.

96. Clark, “Coupling,” 83.

cognitive object. Beyond a mere argument by association (between intellectual and physical matter), however, this argument will broach the question of *how*: how is it that mind and matter interface? The answer, I argue, is in memory.

## 4 “Incantative, Evocative Speaking”<sup>97</sup>: Phenomenology, Memory, and the Power of the Object

Broadly speaking – assuming that human evolution is taken as a given, for one optimistic moment – it does not seem contentious to claim that, if we consider our bodies to be a kind of “response” to an environmental prompt, then our minds must have likewise evolved. This mundane fact does not intend to commit us to any kind of social Darwinism or overriding determinism. It merely reiterates what many scholars, from within many disciplines, have been urging us to reflect upon for years: we can never transcend our particular intellectual embeddedness. Just as the liberal humanist subject can never quite escape the sticky residue of socio-cultural forces to become the sovereign self it so longs to be, the human organism can never quite escape its status as emergent – borne of the stuff of nature. Axiology, a two-pronged endeavor, can be seen as a response to this embeddedness: aesthetics sifting through the contents of human experience to find what is beautiful, and ethics sifting through the contents of human experience to find what is *right*. Such enterprises, however, can only ever be built on the shifting sands of human intuition and judgment, and the best that we can do in ethics is – through principles and heuristics – mark out a space where the ground seems most firm and build

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97. This particular description of phenomenology is borrowed with appreciation from Max van Manen, who describes phenomenology as “like poetry... a poetizing project: it tries an incantative, evocative speaking, a primal telling, wherein we aim to involve the voice into an original singing of the world. But poetizing is not merely a type of poetry, a making of verses. Poetizing is a thinking on original experience and is thus speaking in a more primal sense. Language that authentically speaks the world rather than abstractly speaking of it is a language that reverberates the world, as Merleau-Ponty says, a language that sings the world.” See Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 13.

a foundation of the soundest rationale available to us. We remain at the mercy of a trembling ground.

Unearthing (or, perhaps, *re-earthing*) an ethics of the thing necessarily involves confronting such a truth, exposing the way in which our relationship with materiality is predicated upon pre-existing ideologies that prioritize subjectivity and its instrumental interests. It also, however, opens up the possibility of marking out *new* spaces to build *new* conceptions, which would in turn act as vectors for new ideologies. To formulate such a construction, however, we will need new blueprints that are responsive to our new terrain – that do not destine us to simply re-fabricate old goods on fresh soil. Such an approach will require a few key characteristics. It must be interested in the object *for itself, in itself*. It must minimize subjective interests and biases. We would like to borrow the essence – the ontological and epistemological novelties, as well as the spirit of the manifesto – of Bennett’s vital materialism, but with the inescapability of the extended mind thesis (*à la* Clark and Chalmers). It is, without a doubt, a tall order.

It is with these requirements in mind that I suggest a turn to phenomenology (the study of *phenomena*, or things that appear to our conscious experience *as* they appear to our conscious experience).<sup>98</sup> While such a movement might not be entirely intuitive, there are

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98. While the foundation of phenomenology and its canonical authors and texts is not particularly contested, the practice of phenomenology – given its large domain and considerable lineage – has come to be a somewhat touchy subject. For the purpose of this chapter, I am choosing to adopt a liberal interpretation of phenomenology, agreeing with Linda Finlay’s assessment that “[w]hen commitment to shared scholarly exploration is displaced by dogmatic assertion, both the quality and the potential of phenomenological inquiry are threatened.” This liberal interpretation, however, is oriented around a set of three guiding (and minimum) principles: phenomenological reduction, description, and search for essences. See Linda Finlay, “Debating Phenomenological Research Methods,” *Phenomenology & Practice* 3, no. 1 (2009): 6. See also Amedeo Giorgi, “The Theory,

many reasons to suggest that phenomenology offers us the clearest route to accomplishing our objective. One of the most notable items in the phenomenological vocabulary, for example, is “intentionality”: this term acknowledges that experiences are always directed toward something, or “about” something (the “intentional object”). This is not to say that, when we have an experience, we are limited to the perception of one entity: the object has a “horizontal structure,” both inner and outer, that extends beyond the limits of this original object to include, for example, its temporal dimension and other objects in close spatial proximity. Such thinking is a boon to the task at hand because it prioritizes the *entrenchedness* of subjective experience rather than casting it in the role of a high-flying *deus ex machina*; it implies that “experience and the world co-constitute one another,” although this world is one that the subject “never possesses in its entirety.”<sup>99</sup> Not all aspects of phenomenology, however, are as easily integrated into our task. The major tension involved in such a choice, what we might term the “cautionary note” of phenomenology, pertains to the tension between the phenomenological reduction and its implications for the object. In our everyday interactions with objects, we tend to adopt what phenomenology terms the “natural attitude”: an unthinking acceptance of the reality of the world. To be clear, this is an unreflective metaphysical position: it is the assumption that what we perceive is not just perceptible, but *really there*, in the fullest sense of the phrase. But it is just these metaphysical assumptions that phenomenology looks to expunge from its practice. It does so through the central phenomenological mechanism (part of the larger phenomenological reduction) of “bracketing” or *epoché*, whereby the phenomenologist suspends all such judgments. Phenomenology is *not*

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Practice, and Evaluation of the Phenomenological Method as a Qualitative Research Procedure,” *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 28, no. 2 (1997): 235-260.

99. Howard R. Pollio, Tracy B. Henley, and Craig J. Thompson, *The Phenomenology of Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 7.

phenomenalism: it makes no strong claims about what *is* (or is not<sup>100</sup>) in the same way that phenomenalism asserts that physical objects *are* only perceptual “bundles.” From a phenomenalist perspective, objects attain a passive quality, and the crux of our interest is in analyzing their sense-content. Phenomenology, on the other hand, remains open to ontological commitments.<sup>101</sup> It is interested in a more *active* approach to the object; the crux of our interest in phenomenology is in how these phenomena are constructed, which has intimate links to meaning-giving.<sup>102</sup> That being said, there is clearly a difference between openness (i.e. suspension of both belief and disbelief) and support (i.e. declaration of belief), and phenomenology overtly falls under the former category. Why should we subscribe to a method that, far from the passions of, say, historical materialism, seems to only offer up a reserved handshake toward the object?

My answer is short and sweet: precisely because of this reserved handshake (and a few extra “perks”). Given the tall order that we have placed, it seems unlikely that we can find a pre-existing methodology that does not have some kind of ideological baggage that in some way rubs up against our own. Phenomenology may throw up a wary hand at some of our basic ontological suppositions, but it does so with the intention of not overstepping any epistemological boundaries – a laudable rationale, for our project. Furthermore, we might at least note the possibility that passion is sometimes better put in the service of action than reason. Bennett is more than capable of providing us with rose-colored glasses; what we are most in need of, for now, is a lens that filters out the

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100. Eugen Fink, *Sixth Cartesian Meditation: The Idea of a Transcendental Theory of Method*, trans. Ronald Bruzina (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995), 43.

101. Byong-Chul Park, *Phenomenological Aspects of Wittgenstein's Theory* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), 19.

102. Edo Pivčević, *Husserl and Phenomenology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 68.

semiotic radiance of the object in favor of its “raw” appearance.<sup>103</sup> In this respect, phenomenology seems like just the ticket. If what we want is an open comportment through which to hear the voice of materiality, phenomenology advocates a particularly well-suited attitude, variously described as “disciplined naïveté, bridled dwelling, disinterested attentiveness, and/or *the process of attaining an empathetic wonderment in the face of the world* [my emphasis].”<sup>104</sup> It affords us “a low-hovering, in-dwelling, meditative philosophy that glories in the concreteness of person-world relations and accords lived experience, with all its indeterminacy and ambiguity, primacy over the known.”<sup>105</sup> Equipped with first-person description and a conceptual vocabulary with which we can articulate the idiosyncrasies and intricacies of the object, then, we can perhaps peer more closely (if cautiously) at our conscious experience of the physical object and uncover “fresh, complex, rich descriptions of a phenomenon as it is concretely lived.”<sup>106</sup>

Moreover, while strictly Husserlian phenomenology may have a few sharp thorns to brush past, I would argue that philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty are fundamentally aligned with such a project. This is most obviously highlighted by Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of the value of the phenomenological reduction. Merleau-Ponty’s take on this process mirrors closely his general uptake of phenomenology as a

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103. Bennett herself draws attention to the need to “adopt a more open-ended comportment,” since “[i]f we think we already know what is out there, we will almost surely miss much of it”; she also believes strongly in the value of “moments of sensuous enchantment with the everyday world.” See Bennett, xv and Bennett, xi.

104. Finlay, 12.

105. Frederick Wertz, “Phenomenological Research Methods for Counseling Psychology,” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 52, no. 2 (2005): 175.

106. Finlay, 6.

way of exploring the relationship of the subject with its world. For Edmund Husserl, the phenomenological reduction hinges on an act of transcendence on the part of the subject, whereby “I am *not negating* this ‘world’ as though I were a solipsist; I am *not doubting its factual being* as though I were a skeptic; rather I am exercising the ‘phenomenological’ ἐποχή which also *completely shuts me off from any judgment about spatiotemporal factual being.*”<sup>107</sup> Without this act, no analysis can be properly phenomenological for Husserl.<sup>108</sup> This is not quite the case for Merleau-Ponty. Such a transcendent turn, for him, belies the fact that our bodies are our primary means of knowing the world, and cannot be so simply cast aside – like an ornate hat that, though not without utility, obscures our vision with its excesses. It is only through our bodies that the world becomes intelligible, and such an intelligibility cannot help but have a kind of *residue*. He does not, as some suggest, dismiss the possibility of the reduction out of hand, commenting that it is “because we are through and through related to the world, the only way for us to catch sight of ourselves is by suspending this movement, by refusing to be complicit with it... or again, to put it out of play.”<sup>109</sup> In other words, the reduction *is* useful inasmuch as, in our attempt to complete the reduction, we are met by the world’s inextricability: when we have “reduced,” we realize that we just cannot reduce *quite enough*, and are confronted with the fact that this new phenomenological attitude – as a consequence of our embodiment – is merely a different comportment toward the world. “If we were absolute spirit,” Merleau-Ponty comments, “the reduction would not be problematic. *But since, on the contrary, we are in and toward the world, and since even our reflections take place in the temporal flow that they are attempting to capture... there*

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107. Husserl, 61.

108. Richard Schmitt, “Husserl’s Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 20, no. 2 (1959): 238.

109. Merleau-Ponty, *lxxvii*.

*is no thought that encompasses all of our thought* [my emphasis].”<sup>110</sup> Given that the body is our nexus between the subject and the object, such an attitude bodes well for us. His further comment that there is “an immanent or nascent meaning [*sens*] in the living body [that] extends... to the entire sensible world” that allows us to “discover the miracle of expression in all other ‘objects’” is also clearly in harmony with our aims.<sup>111</sup>

It is not uncommon for scholars to point to Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* to indicate an entry point for 20<sup>th</sup>-century French phenomenology. No doubt this has more to do with a delicate madeleine soaked in lime-blossom tea than a phenomenological penchant for dinner parties and tawdry affairs. It is arguably not the most *sensuous* descriptive passage in his magnum opus – here we might look to, for example, the “celestial hues” of asparagus with their “white feet – still stained a little by the soil of their garden-bed”<sup>112</sup> – but it makes a strong case for being the most *evocative*. Starting with only a small, fluted sponge-cake, Proust lingers on and gently probes the nascent sensations induced by this petite dessert until an entire world springs forward – not just the world of “the water-lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village,”<sup>113</sup> but what in phenomenology is called a “lifeworld.” The lifeworld is not a set of objective relations between factual entities, but is the pre-reflective lived situation that comprises the setting of our everyday lives – “that experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression... to which every scientific determination is abstract, signitive, and dependent, just like geography with regard to the landscape where we first learned

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110. Ibid., *lxxviii*.

111. Ibid., 205.

112. Marcel Proust, *Swann’s Way*, vol. 1 of *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 169.

113. Ibid., 64.

what a forest, a meadow, or a river is.”<sup>114</sup> In starting with the seed of the madeleine and cracking open a lifeworld, Proust’s account is not merely poignant, but gestures to Merleau-Ponty’s strong contention that “[t]he world is not an object whose law of constitution I have in my possession; it is the natural milieu and the field of all my thoughts and of all my explicit perceptions.”<sup>115</sup> The truths that are bodied forth from the madeleine appear through the madeleine because “[t]ruth does not merely ‘dwell’ in the ‘inner man’ [*sic*]; or rather, there is no ‘inner man,’ man is in and toward the world, and it is in the world that he knows himself.”<sup>116</sup>

It is with this in mind that we turn for a time to a first-person, descriptive account of the object through a kind of phenomenology of memory. A point of clarification may be helpful here. Why, one might wonder, if we are looking to get to the object, would we start with memory – arguably the most abstracted form of subjective experience? Does this not run entirely contrary to our current purpose, and would it not be preferable to take a more direct route – to develop a phenomenology of the object? In response to this, I would suggest that – despite the praiseworthiness of this commitment to grappling with objecthood in an immediate and unmitigated way – such a move would first of all run considerably *more* contrary to our current purpose, which is (in part) to respect the limits of our subjective capacities in regards to the powers of the object. Our mediated relationship with objects is an epistemological barrier, one that we can only hope to minimize by employing methodological strategies that string together the “its” and the “mes” – not assuming a kind of natural but forgotten equivalence between us. Memory is one such strategy. On a related note, acknowledging this distance is part of what enables us to then acknowledge that the object is not something that can be distilled and bottled

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114. Merleau-Ponty, *lxxii*.

115. *Ibid.*, *lxxiv*.

116. *Ibid.*, *lxxiv*.

for human consumption, but can exceed our understanding and use (in Bennett's terms, it has an "out-side" that presents itself as an epistemological limit<sup>117</sup>). Finally, it is my contention that such a project would simply be at odds with phenomenology's aim. Phenomenology can help us understand structures of consciousness as they appear through experience; this is its purview. A phenomenology of the object is at best cryptic and at worst an extreme form of panpsychism: it would suggest that we are interested in working through the conscious experience of the object. While we are interested in expanding the extended mind theory, such an expansion – to claim that objects have conscious experience in the same way as the subject – is radical beyond the scope of my powers of justification.

What is it like to experience a memory? Another lesson that Proust's passage can teach us is that such an experience, while frequent and not in any way elusive, is much more ineffable than one might expect. I might think of Gruffy, the beloved stuffed animal mentioned in passing in a previous chapter, and posit him as the intentional object of my memory. I first need to withdraw from the natural attitude; I must bracket my impulse to impose external assumptions and frameworks upon the memory lest they color how this memory presents itself to me. It would not be right, phenomenologically speaking, to think of Gruffy as an assemblage of cotton, polyester, and plastic any more than it would be right to think of him as a symptom of alienated labor. If I could simply "close my eyes" (metaphorically and perhaps literally speaking), conjure its memory and have, entirely self-evident, its material construction manifest in my mind as a number of distinct substances, there would be a large burden taken off of the shoulders of the chemical sciences. Since it is, instead, the result of a scientific orientation toward the world, I must strip it away and be more attentive to the intentional object.

A visual image, sketchy and incomplete, hovers at what feels like the very edge of my perceptual range. I see white hair that covers the expanse of an object that forms a

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117. Bennett, 3.

physical unity. It is matte, and thinner in some places than others, exposing some kind of rough beige underside to the object. I see black protrusions, horns, emerging from the top of the object. They too are uneven and patchy: black in places, but interspersed with more instances of this rough beige underside, and mottled – at times they appear black, but at times they actually appear grey, although my perception does not sharply demarcate between these elements of black and elements of grey, but rather instinctively averages out these shades so that they appear without close inspection to be natural variation. Two smooth black circles, glossy, adorn the face as eyes.

But this memory is not merely visual, but *affective*. My memory of this object does not appear to me in isolation, but rather brings with it a number of emotional sensations. The primary sensation that I experience is positive: a warm, effusive impression of assurance that persists for as long as the visual remains. From where does this impression come? If I pause on this question and try to cultivate the affective purchase of the memory, I find that my mind lingers on certain aspects of the object. The sparseness of its hair and the patchiness of its flaking black paint seem to hold some kind of special draw; when I hold them in my thoughts, a number of new memories come to me, unbidden. Initially, they are vague: the feel of the soft white hair sliding between my fingers, or how it felt to have its horns between my teeth, soft and yielding with a small amount of stretch. But these vague memories point elsewhere: they, like smoke indicating a fire, are indexes of more extensive recollections. The sensation of stroking his hair segues into this same sensation as it was lived in a particular instantiation. It is the memory of, after an outbreak of lice at school, my mother's insistence that we launder my stuffed animals. More affect: my pursuant dismay at the strange matted quality to its coat afterward, and my fixation on running my hands aggressively through it so that it might be fluffy again. Then a memory comes of the horns – a memory of one of many nights lying awake, edging on bored but for the moment simply idly contemplative, enjoying the strange, yielding mouth-feel of an elastic exterior drawn thin over a soft, springy interior as I contemplate the odd, Rorschach test-esque quality of my floral curtains. These memories, in turn, point me to others, which unfold from their own hazy visual representations. The firm line of my mother's mouth as she collects my stuffed animals ushers forth an oppressive summer heat and the sinking of my soccer cleats into moist, loamy soil – I was refusing with

irritation her attempted administration of sunblock, which stung painfully when it mingled with sweat and dripped into my unsuspecting eyes. Resting in bed while idly contemplating my furnishings invokes my intense appreciation, as a child, of the sensation of coolness that comes from flipping over one's pillow to access the side that had previously been pressed against the sheets – a wonderful sensation on sticky August nights. This process of deferral, moving from memory to memory, continues indefinitely.

How might we consider such a process as different from perception? If we want to get a sense of the essence or *eidōs* of a phenomenon, the critical second step in the phenomenological reduction is the eidetic reduction – a process wherein one effectively “beats around the bush,” imaginatively varying the intentional object, in an attempt to separate out the essential features from the dispensable. In many ways, perception seems to appear to us in the same way that memory does. Consider our previous example. If, instead of conjuring it in my mind, I simply place Gruffy in front of my vision with the correct phenomenological attitude, I end up with a similar result. The same constitution of thinning hair and patchy black spots appears to my consciousness visually, although its direct observation presents it to me as an exact image and not an imperfect representation. This level of exactness, however, does effect a change in the overall experience. As a direct object of perception, Gruffy now exerts a pull on me as a *univocal whole*, with no particular features standing out by demanding my attention. Certainly it is possible, if I wish to, to pay particular heed to these features, and – in so doing – inspire these same memories to be triggered. But this recall is only part of the perceptual process *per accidens* rather than *per se*, once removed from the process proper. It is the instigation of a separate phenomenon. We might, of course, choose to engage the object and, in so doing, provoke a change in it whereby its utility determines its focal points, but this too is to step outside of perceptual bounds. With an open and unimposing phenomenological attitude, I *perceive* this object as a fulsome possibility, while the transition into memory collapses this possibility into a succession of experiences. How this experiential quality is expressed is through highlighting of features of its appearance that are indexically tied to the experience. In our case, this is the sparseness of its hair and the flaking black quality of its horns, and – while both this sparseness and this flaking are

visible through perception – they are only imbued with significance through the recollection process.

If our analysis, then, has indicated to us that there is a fundamental *indexical* quality to memory that stakes out its territory, then the next logical question might be to ask: how does memory achieve such a quality? What do our experiences of memory all share, inasmuch as they harken back to another time? The answer to this, I argue, is in physical mutability. A world in which physical mutability does not exist is a world in which the concept of memory is, if not *impossible*, then extraordinarily limited. This is because the concept of memory is fundamentally indebted to the concept of *difference*, which in turn carries with it the property of mutability. In a world of physical homogeneity, memory is meaningless. Memory turns on distinctions, which are what allows one to distinguish between different objects. If I am attempting to recall object *a*, which takes the shape of a square, I produce a mental representation constituted by four straight lines which meet four times at ninety degree angles. If I am attempting to recall object *b*, which is an equilateral triangle, I produce a mental representation constituted by three straight lines which meet three times at sixty degree angles. Memory assists me as I attempt to recall object *a* because it retains a blueprint of the form of object *a*. There is no problem yet. What happens, though, if we inhabit a world in which there is *only* the form of object *a*? Such a world is, of course, difficult to envision because of our innate capability to break down objects into component parts: object *a*, for instance, can be disassembled and re-configured as straight lines, points, triangles, empty space, *etc.* Furthermore, our own mode of being in the world is as highly complex and mutable beings. If we overlooked this latter fact, however, and we were we capable of finding a unit of matter which can neither be added to nor further reduced and imagining it as metaphysical singularity, the observation at hand – that there would be no memory to recollect – would be intuitive. We previously noted that the body can be seen as a response to an environmental prompt; in a world where all is the same, there is no environmental prompt that would motivate a process of memory. A more phenomenological way of expressing this might be to say that homogeneity shatters the notion of the horizontal structure. The retention and protension of time cannot be observed, since time is only a kind of heuristic used to chronicle physical change induced by the flux of existence – of which there is none. We

cannot distinguish between the intentional object and objects that we are tacitly oriented toward because there are no markers by which to distinguish them.

Of course, difference is not the same as mutability, it is just a predicate of mutability. Let us try to imagine a world in which there is difference but no mutability. At first, memory would seem to have a place: as our bodies engage with a world that appears to us in many different shapes, sizes, textures, *etc.*, it would be useful to recall the differences between them during times when I am not directly engaged with them. However, we must here consider to what degree one can engage with an immutable object. Let us posit an object *c*. This can be any object within our experience – say, a tea cup. What can we do with this tea cup in an immutable universe? We might start by suggesting that we pick it up. Surely if there is an innocuous gesture that stops shy of non-engagement, it is to simply *touch* an object. But does such a touch not engender an effect? We might think of the ocean lapping gently at the sands of a beach. A calm, slow wave may well be more gentle than contact with a hand. Yet this gentle wave, over a great expanse of time, is irremediably responsible for acts of erosion that may cause a jagged surface to become smooth and polished. There is no denying that the end result is a material change. We might conclude, then, that engagement of such a world in any substantive way would be impossible. The notion of a world with difference but no mutability is therefore not livable. We might try to push this thought experiment to its limits, striving to imagine a world in which touch did not imply mutability. At this point, however, the thought experiment becomes too wildly outside of the realm of possibility. A world that embodies difference without mutability is already analogous to a conflict that embodies social disagreement without opinion. This further step breaks the fragile illusion of conceivability.

Such an account inspires one particularly fair critique. In our example, we use a specific object to interrogate memory; this object is not the object of everyday memory, but instead has a distinctly nostalgic quality to it. Is it possible that we are simply equivocating between forms of memory in order to forge a link between two things that are of fundamentally different types? We might think of how we use memory most frequently in our lives. Much memory, it seems, does not have an unmotivated intentional

object attributed to it. It is much more likely, for instance, that I use my memory to recall the *location* of a stuffed animal than to simply recall it for reasons related to the intrinsic value of the memory act. In this respect, memory may seem more aligned with the type of perception discussed above, whereby the object presents itself as more of a fulsome possibility (future-oriented, univocal) than experiential (overdetermined, focal).

A return to lived experience again may prove useful here. I have lost my object; my current objective is to locate it. What do I experience next? There is a vertiginous sensation of emptiness in my mind as I try to coax out not only a visual of the object itself, but my last perception of its outer horizon (e.g. those objects that, while not the intentional object, comprise its *milieu*). I might run through a list of circumstances in which I have used it. I might run through a list of other objects with which it is somehow complementary. These strategies assist me with provoking a recollection of my object in its current location. Either way, what I am invoking are *different* objects in *different* material situations, and it is this *difference* that will eventually lead me to my solution. It is the interaction of my objects with different objects and different contexts that makes it meaningful to me. With no difference, such a project is doomed to fail. As we noted, difference comes hand-in-hand with mutability: we might say that the possibility of difference is simultaneously its own promise. We again see that physical mutability is necessary to a coherent notion of memory.

One final remark might be made. It is possible, of course, that we have memories that are directed toward objects that are not physical: the memory, for instance, of a spoken phrase. In fact, we could open this point up to any non-visual account of memory: a spoken phrase, but also a touch, smell, taste, *etc.* All of these can be intentional objects, but none of them are physical objects. How, then, can they bear the material traces of mutability that I posit are necessary for memory? We might again simply return to the idea of the error of trying to divorce any kind of information – including sensory – from a material basis. A spoken phrase is always issued from a body; touch is the interaction of two bodies as their spatial positions overlap; a smell is an extramissionistic process initiated and completed by a body (often different); a taste can be described in much the same way as the last. These bodies can only ever exist through the same state of

difference that comes in tandem with mutability. Furthermore, such memories take the same shape as the memory described previously. A whispered word: in perception, it gestures to a meaning that can be taken up and lived by the subject. In memory, it manifests as a number of qualities that point to its material origin and experiential quality (e.g. the timbre of its vocal origin and this timbre's particular horizontality). While less overtly obvious, non-physical intentional objects still ultimately refer to physical referents which exhibit an indebtedness to physical mutability, and this natural state of reference is obvious in how they unveil themselves to the subject.

Having established the primacy of physical mutability to the process of memory, all that remains is to step outside of our phenomenological attitude to address the question of primogeniture. We have said that we cannot think of memory without physical mutability: is it fair to say that subjective memory “owes” itself to physical mutability? Not only would I answer in the affirmative, but it seems to me that physical mutability could be considered a weak form of memory in itself. This is not to say that matter is a kind of interactive skeleton upon which subjective memory is progressively layered. While it is true that we take advantage of the object's ability to bear the weight of our experience, the fact of this ability seems to point to something intrinsic to the object that possesses an originary memory-quality. In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler argues that it is the very material quality of bodies that lends them importance – bodies both matter (i.e. are expressed as tangible objects) and matter (i.e. have significance and value), and these two facts are tightly knit together. “Insofar as matter appears... to be invested with a certain capacity to originate and to compose that for which it also supplies the principle of intelligibility,” she states, “*then matter is clearly defined by a certain power of creation and rationality* that is for the most part divested from the more modern deployments of the term [my emphasis].”<sup>118</sup> Such thought is in alignment with longstanding ways of thinking of matter, including the Aristotelian conception in which

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118. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 32.

matter is “neither a simple, brute positivity or referent nor a blank surface or slate awaiting an external signification,” but instead is the pure potentiality upon which actuality is made possible through the imposition of form.<sup>119</sup> If we see this power of creation and rationality as *inherent in* the object, and closely linked (as we previously noted) to the ideas of potentiality and actuality (or possibility and experience), is it such a stretch to see this inherent quality as attached to the natural transformative propensity of materiality at large? The inner horizontal structure of the object is in part comprised of the retention and protension of itself inside of temporality; such a retention and protension is evidenced partially by material changes to the object, rendering it a kind of palimpsest through which an object is simultaneously a single appearance and a body of historical evidence that is muted (though always present and active, though not silenced) by the limitations of material presentation. In this way, we can argue that there *is* a sense in which the object holds more in cognitive properties than Clark and Chalmers can offer (i.e. part of a coupled system responsible for limited belief states): it also, in its physical mutability, embodies a form of memory that presages and enables subjective memory.<sup>120</sup> We might refer to this memory-quality as a protophenomenal property – much as Bennett refers to those nonsubjects who exhibit a quiet agency as “protoactants.”<sup>121</sup>

Where does this leave us, in terms of our project? The idea of memory being inextricably bound up with matter, I argue, leaves us with a more practical way of conceptualizing matter in order to reap the ethico-political and pragmatic benefits that

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119. *Ibid.*, 31.

120. We can draw another parallel with Bennett here: vital materialism claims that “humanity’s awesome, awful powers” are “evidence of our own constitution as vital materiality,” and our account similarly considers materiality to be originary. See Bennett, 10.

121. *Ibid.*, *viii*.

Bennett has in her sights. I do not contest that matter is agentic – that it operates in mysterious ways that human hubris would do well to respect. I would even suggest that the current version of the vitality of matter merely seeks to characterize this agency, and that Bennett’s text briefly skirts such an idea without exploring its full ramifications.<sup>122</sup>

Bennett’s chosen formula, however, leaves the average person not only struggling against a notion of agency that counters that of common sense, but offers little in the way of a mechanism for appreciating its veracity. In a memory-focused account, on the contrary, we find ourselves constantly in the presence of physical triggers that are more or less obvious given our comportment and/or their removal from the physical object, but that are always constitutionally part of our experience. The powers of the object (or thing-power), still silent and mysterious, now shoot through our very being.

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122. I am referring here to a few sentences written by Bennett on Bernard Stiegler, in which she reiterates how “conscious reflection in (proto)humans first emerged with the use of stone tools because the materiality of the tool acted as an external marker... an ‘archive’ of its function.” See Bennett, 31.

## 5 Conclusion (Paging Epimetheus: From *Dyspraxia* to *Eupraxia*)

Accounts of matter as lively are hardly a new scholarly fashion, and are not restricted to materialism proper. Ancient Greeks, in early efforts to explain phenomena, frequently partook of material monism, seeing in matter life forces fit to fashion a world. For Thales of Miletus, it was water: divine and creative, it suffused and enlivened all. For Anaximenes, the *arche* was instead air, which rarefied and condensed in order to produce the diversity of distinct physical entities that we see around us. Heraclitus instead opted for fire as “the thunderbolt [that] steers the totality of things.”<sup>123</sup> These particular views are known as *hylozoism*: the belief that matter (*hylo-*) is endowed with life (*zōē*), or – perhaps less jarring to contemporary sensibilities – that life and matter are inseparable. But this notion is anything but antiquated. The Italian Renaissance introduced into the philosophical lexicon the term *panpsychism*; this somewhat stronger hypothesis, which contends that consciousness (or mind/spirit) permeates everything without exception, has aroused considerable interest since its inception, and is enjoying a popular resurgence in contemporary philosophy of mind. The tricky problem of emergentism in physicalist accounts of reality and the general (and ancient) maxim that one “can’t get anything from nothing” (*ex nihilo nihil fit*) lend panpsychism a great deal of explanatory appeal, and – far from a niche New Age belief – it has been adapted and refined by a variety of notable scholars in fields as diverse as theology (e.g. David Ray Griffin) and neuroscience (e.g. Christof Koch). This is not even to mention conceptualizations of vital matter that speak through, for example, pantheism – which in turn reminds us that such a recapitulation entirely excludes the rich intellectual histories beyond the Western canon.

Yet, for all of these accounts of a vibrant matter, we still struggle to respect matter as being substantial in light of its *substance*. As a species, our relationship with our physical environment can be described as problematic at best. Since the arrival of the Industrial

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123. Heraclitus, “Fragment 64,” quoted in *Fragments*, ed. and trans. T. M. Robinson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 43.

Revolution and the increased levels of atmospheric pollution that came alongside its technological advances, we have struggled to achieve a relationship with our environment that reflects its value and the necessity of sustainable practices. Biocentric concerns – while legitimate and attention-worthy in their own right – often overshadow the precarity of the physical substrate that enables and conditions biological existence. Unfortunately, even these biocentric concerns are ill-addressed as prevalent ideologies – including socio-cultural norms, political viability, and financial interests – compete against them and ultimately, in their short-term allure, win out. This problem is only exacerbated by our attitude toward our newfound industrial capabilities. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have the means to create and replicate the instruments essential to human comfort more efficiently, reliably, and lastingly than ever before. While we have harnessed the efficient and reliable aspects of these means, however, we have propagated a consumer culture that encourages ephemeral items that pass only fleetingly through our lives before either planned obsolescence or passing fashion designates them garbage. Landfills comprised of masses of plastic baby diapers and water bottles testify as to how quickly things pass from their initial state of specialized, pristine consumer product to purposeless, pervasive trash.

Of course, the physical universe needs no subject to persist and thrive. Were we to utterly and irremediably degrade our planet to the point that it could no longer engender and maintain life, material existence would not simply cease. It would, if you will forgive the colloquialism, “keep on keepin’ on.” But while the universe would appear overwhelmingly similar, given that we are an incredibly minute presence in an unthinkably vast astronomical picture, there is still an extraordinarily large amount that could be lost. Human history is shackled to its material substrate. There is no disembodied database that will hold our struggles and successes, that will encapsulate our frail but beautiful lives: such information is expressed through the navigation of these lives through their worlds, and the imprint that this navigation leaves. The Earth is our database, and we inscribe it with our bodies. If we annihilate the Earth’s diversity and complexity, then we annihilate the diversity and complexity of our own stories. This, too, is only the most self-centered point of consideration. It does not even touch on the billions of years of history that predate the brief if conspicuous genesis of *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

We have learned, through excavating practices, about the kinds of beings that came before us and their own conditions of life. This, too, is at risk. While this information can be found in biological organisms (e.g. tree rings), it is also richly evidenced in non-biological substances (e.g. sediment), and neither is immune to human activity.<sup>124</sup>

What we need, then, is not merely a new conception of matter – novelty is not the concern here. What we need is a conception of matter that acknowledges it as something more than merely “stuff,” and that will present itself to us so naturally that we cannot help but bring it to mind not only in our moments of cerebral abstraction, but in our moments of pragmatic interaction. We need to be able to peer at the most mundane of things – our toothbrushes, our writing desks – and see, staring back at us, more than a thing with which to *x*. Such thinking, while not without weight, has not served us well so far, and I agree with Bennett that “the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption.”<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, we need to see more in the object than second-hand echoes of our own subjectivity, or a means to further our own interests. Our tendency to project ourselves ever-outward rarely provides a sound basis for a balanced investigation of something fundamentally other, if (thankfully) complementary. The power of alterity resides in the fact that there is a gap between two things; we are doing both ourselves and the object of inquiry a disservice in collapsing this gap and thereby obliterating all of the implications that it has for the constitution of both parties. The power of a self-serving attitude is in accomplishing personal objectives. While it is true that to entirely escape self-interest is impossible in light of the fact that values and perspectives are subjective in

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124. For an example of a text investigating the impact of human activity on paleontological efforts, see Vincent L. Santucci, Jason P. Kenworthy, and Alison L. Mims, “Monitoring In Situ Paleontological Resources,” in *Geological Monitoring*, ed. Rob Young and Lisa Norby (Boulder: Geological Society of America, 2009), 191.

125. Bennett, *ix*.

nature, limiting the degree to which we gear into this self-interest will give us a clearer view from which we will ultimately, if not immediately, benefit. This is the formula which I drew up to re-frame the thing for the good of the thing. This, I believe, is what I have done.

While Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* can be seen as an ideal springboard for such a project, her own prescription is generous with the theory and sparing with the *praxis*. Bennett implores us to seriously consider how seeing thingness as an agentic force might affect our political analyses and, in so doing, have a positive impact on lived realities. It is not that Bennett does not understand the ethico-political heft of the situation at hand: her text explicitly acknowledges that the ontological and epistemological threads that weave through her text are loaded with ethical and political implications, and these implications are in fact its driving force. When considering her contribution as a whole, however, it appears that these weaving threads are often manipulated by a forgetful hand, and get all too easily caught up in stitching together disparate ideas into a concordant and attractive portrait of a *demos* of thingness. While *Vibrant Matter* is peppered with contemporary events and issues that complement Bennett's undertaking, exploration of the intersection of these events and issues through her theoretical framework at times feels more like an end than a means to an end, and this sense of the weak effectuality of her work is amplified by the relatively cursory way in which she uncertainly deliberates its implementation. This criticism is concisely pinpointed by one detractor, who comments that it "leaves the political – if not political theory – undercooked."<sup>126</sup>

None of this, however, is to say that the intellectual work of *Vibrant Matter* must be discarded as cheap rhetoric. On the contrary, I would agree with Nicky Gregson that "*Vibrant Matter* shows Bennett to be a generous, humane, humble and honest scholar,"

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126. Nicky Gregson, "Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things," review of *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, by Jane Bennett, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 1, no. 3: 403.

and the fact that her preferred authorities include the likes of Spinoza and Deleuze indicate that her alignment with political philosophy is here merely more *philosophical* than *political* – an orientation for which there should be no shame or reprimand.<sup>127</sup> What it does suggest, however, is that we need to look elsewhere if our priority is constructing an account that has both (intellectual) rigor and (pragmatic) resonance. *Where* we should look, of course, depends on what we see as the key obstacle to such a pragmatic resonance. Drawing from Bennett's text, I agree that action-oriented perception – the way in which objects present themselves to us as fundamentally suited for practical usage – poses a challenge to understanding the object as more than just the passive buttress of subjective experience, and further argue that such an obstacle is made all the more insuperable by its *natural* and *instinctual* qualities. Embedded in the way that we perceive the external world is the seed of an all-encompassing concern for utility. Our problem, then, is finding a means of thinking materiality that is also natural and instinctual, if somewhat less apparent. We seek, for now, to become (to borrow some Heideggerian terminology) neither lords of beings nor shepherds of Being, but rather farmers of both, re-seeding a solution to the subject-object problem that hybridizes objects and subjects in a way that maintains the distinction of two different strains while seeing in their collaboration only the overpowering asset of a resultant lifeworld.

By looking to Clark and Chalmers' landmark article on extended mind theory, I posit that seeing the external environment as agentic in the sense that it has a mind-like quality as a useful first step to honoring such a priority. Discourse on the subject has traditionally revolved around, in one way or another, the prized position of the subject as the possessor of mind – expressed divinely (i.e. as spirit) or secularly (i.e. as consciousness), but always as something wondrous. It is this perceived lack on the part of the object that paves the way for a hierarchial valuation system that puts it at a natural disadvantage. If we can seal the rift of this chasm and bridge the subject and the object, we might gain some headway in horizontalizing this relationship. Of course, artificially inducing what

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127. Gregson, 404; Gregson, 402.

we might call a “mental physical object” would be an unforgivable contradiction of our aims, which are not to assimilate the object into human culture, but rather to foster a culture of the object that highlights the unique capacities that arise out of its unique way of being in the world. What Clark and Chalmers help us realize, however, is that there is no level of artifice involved in devising such an object. Where the artifice truly lays, on the contrary, is in framing cognition as a subjective process that happens wholly within the confines of the human head – a tendency that they refer to as the “hegemony of skin and skull.” If we can recognize the importance of coupled systems – how, for example, my iPhone cooperates with cognitive processes in order to retain and retrieve information, and how this information can be said to embody limited forms of belief states – then we can fashion a compelling argument for how objects, free of any sleight of hand, take on a mental quality.

The problem with Clark and Chalmers’ argument is not intrinsic to its content, but rather pertains to its limitations and methodology. They simply do not go far enough, and the distance that they *do* traverse is thickly sedimented with an anthropocentric style of thinking. Of course, such an approach cannot inspire reproach when the primary interest is means of cognizing: it is, inarguably, the right tool for the right job. Our job, however, is slightly different than their own, and we must take what valuable lessons we can and amend them accordingly. Chalmers’ own work goes somewhat further than the work that came out of his collaboration with Clark, and in looking at his thought regarding intrinsic qualities of physicality, we can append to the extended mind theory the notion of protophenomenal qualities. We cannot bear the idea that there is nothing *to* physicality that defines it – that the world is essentially empty, just consisting of the free play of baseless interactions. At the same time, we struggle with the problem of emergentism: how consciousness seems to have spontaneously arisen out of a physical medium that exhibits no properties of consciousness. One possible solution to this problem is protophenomenal qualities: qualities that are intrinsic to physical objects that, taken additively, produce the phenomenal qualities that we as subjects experience. In this way, our physical environment would be steeped in experience, and the mental feature of the subject that has traditionally been seen to “separate the wheat from the chaff,” from an ontological perspective, would be recognized as belonging most properly to the object –

or the chaff. This, however, does leave us with a rather large question mark hanging in the foreground. It is easy to postulate protophenomenal properties; it is entirely another thing to identify them. Since the prize of such an identification is, after all, elucidation on the topic of how we might see the object as even more mind-like, can we speculate on what these protophenomenal properties might be?

My answer to this is that we should look to the memory-quality of objects in order to find something akin to a protophenomenal property. Adopting a phenomenological attitude toward memory can help us understand how memory is not, in fact, a “storehouse whose stores are nothing stored nowhere,” but rather a process that relies heavily on the characteristic of physical mutability.<sup>128</sup> When I perceive an object, my mind paints an impressionistic image that I later use in recall. But this image is not univocal, and my experiences in the world bear material traces, which then manifest in memory as compelling features onto which one latches and propels oneself through past experience. This process is most obvious in visual memory, but its primordial form can be traced to any account of memory that relies on *difference*, which we cannot ever practically divorce from mutability – what we might re-frame as the capacity to engender difference. Given that our senses rely on distinctions in order to operate, we can justly say that this circumscribes *all* accounts of memory. By drawing parallels between the physical object and how its mutable form bears witness to past experience and subjective memory, which does much the same thing, it is possible to conceive of a kind of “material memory” that enables our own. We might call this a *nostalgic* account: an account that recognizes in the practice of memory a sense in which we all feel the pain of longing (*algos*) to go home (*nostos*) – our home in the material object from whence we all spring.

We have insisted on the pressing nature of finding a way of envisaging memory that is new and yet livable. Unlike many academic enterprises, the main challenge of this has

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128. David Farrell Krell, “Phenomenology of Memory from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 42, no. 4 (1982): 492.

not been having insufficient data on the object of investigation, but rather too *much*. How we relate to materiality reflects a long and burgeoning history that has adhered so well that it is difficult to tell where the object ends and where the ideology begins.

Furthermore, even if we can get through that thick paint of subjectivity, we feel powerless in determining what new veneer we ought to apply in order to emphasize its natural lustre without altering its natural hue. We feel a certain amount of sympathy for Meno, who – in the Platonic dialogue of the same name – asks Socrates: “How are you going to search for [the nature of virtue] when you don’t know at all what it is, Socrates? Which of all the things you don’t know will you set up as target for your search? And even if you actually come across it, how will you know that it *is* that thing which you don’t know?”<sup>129</sup> We know, from the perspective of hindsight, that the way that we interact with our material environment is far from ideal: we see symptomatic effects everywhere. Yet it is hard to see how a solution might unfold from the problem, and – in the event that it does – how we would recognize it as a solution. For Plato, the solution to finding the essence of virtue was *anamnesis*: recognizing truth that was never gone, but only forgotten. In the same way, we might contend that seeing matter as memory is something that we all intuitively understand, but have never come to fully appreciate. The beauty of such an account is that, as in the case of *Meno*, there is no complicated knowledge of physics required in order to recall what we have forgotten: given the right conditions, the right mindset, and perhaps a small gadfly, one can come to these conclusions independently. By using phenomenology, we have ensured that it is only the contents of experience that bring us to the essence of memory.

Of course, reconceptualizing matter is only a necessary first step in effecting change at a societal level. The consumerism (i.e. economic materialism) that dominates Western culture, for instance, is not simply a bad habit that we might break at will – like chewing our nails or, perhaps more suitably, picking at a scab. The Joneses with whom we must

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129. Plato, *Meno*, in *Plato’s Meno in Focus*, ed. Jane M. Day (London: Routledge, 1994), 47.

keep up with have been around since before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thorstein Veblen, in his 1899 text *Theory of the Leisure Class*, penned an early account of such practices, remarking that “[c]ustomary expenditure must be classed under the head of waste in so far as the custom on which it rests is traceable to the habit of making an invidious pecuniary comparison – in so far as it is conceived that it could not have become customary and prescriptive without the backing of this principle of pecuniary reputability or relative economic success. It is obviously not necessary that a given object of expenditure should be exclusively wasteful in order to come in under the category of conspicuous waste.”<sup>130</sup> In other words, economists and sociologists have been observing for well over a century a prevailing attitude in which an item’s value accords to the degree to which it represents an enviable social status – a valuation system that Veblen refers to as one of “conspicuous waste,” and which feeds into irresponsible resource consumption. His second point – that such an item need not be entirely purposeless in order to be wasteful – is a careful and particularly germane one. While it serves a primarily clarifying purpose in his explanation, it also gestures to an especially poignant truth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: that, below an overzealous consumer mentality, there trickles a thin stream of *logos* that lends a weak credence to this zeal. A plastic baby diaper, for instance, hardly seems like a luxury item, designed as it is to dispose of urine and fecal matter. A single-use water bottle, too, is a delivery system for a life-sustaining substance. Yet it is the *disposability* of these items that mark them with the dark sign of waste. If they no longer smack of “invidious pecuniary comparison,” then it is simply because over a century of consumerism has both dramatically increased the variety and availability of goods and substantially heightened (and normalized) purchasing baselines. The quiet whisper of consumerist logic reasons that the diaper and the bottle are essential to hygiene and health. It is hard to hear the counterplea of sustainability with its antithesis plastered on television screens, department store flyers, and through online marketing.

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130. Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (Bremen: Books on Demand, 2011), 70.

The political climate for environmental change at this time also appears quite bleak. There was a time – a recent one – where environmentalism was seen as a “motherhood and apple pie” issue: the sort of system of values that was widespread if not universal, and to which no respectable community-minded individual could reasonably object. What once was derided as “treehugger mentality” came, over the course of several decades, to be identified (in a mild form, at least) as a baseline level of care exhibited by a conscientious citizen. Who was not enthused at the prospect of clean energy and the electric car in the early 2000s? An entire style of rhetoric emerged around “going green” with sustainable practices, and toting along reusable bags to the grocery store became not only a common practice, but sometimes public policy.<sup>131</sup> In the wake of recent economic downturns, however, environmental concern seems to be less pressing and less persistent, occupying a more peripheral place in mainstream values and spiking mainly in the shadow of singular “focusing events,” which create a “push” for political agendas and legislative change (e.g. the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster).<sup>132</sup> Of course, it is difficult to measure environmental sentiment – and what measurements we can procure have limited power to offer an exhaustive interpretation. While studies of public opinion can offer us hard, quantitative evidence, it can be difficult to shape this raw data into a well-supported narrative. What we *can* say is that, in a 2014 Greendex survey, Canada and the U.S. both showed decreased levels of sustainability in

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131. Jennifer Clapp and Linda Swanston, “Doing Away With Plastic Shopping Bags: International Patterns of Norm Emergence and Policy Implementation,” in *Environmental Politics* 18, no. 3 (2009): 316.

132. For an in-depth analysis of the influence of focusing events on public policy, see Thomas A. Birkland, *After Disaster: Agenda Setting, Public Policy, and Focusing Events* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1997).

relation to previous surveys.<sup>133</sup> This flagging attentiveness to environmental issues, furthermore, cannot be attributed to a particularly keen historical commitment that simply set an ambitiously high bar: the nations ranked 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> out of 18 nations, respectively.<sup>134</sup> While the environment is certainly not off of our value radar yet, it is inching closer to the fringes, and only an effective, targeted, and sustained effort to re-invigorate environmental awareness is likely to ameliorate the situation.

Such an effort – to go beyond what we can realistically identify as armchair reasoning, and push more forcefully toward translation into lived experience – remains, alas, beyond the confines of this monograph. In recognizing this as a shortcoming of this research, however, we must not shortchange the power of the text. If we borrow again Foucault’s notion of productive power, we can see that bodies are never entirely free of nor entirely bound by an authoritarian, superior power; rather, bodies shape and re-shape according to the circulation of texts within larger bodies of discourse, which construct and re-construct the norms that embody and exude power. Similarly, we might see that – with enough texts – a changed discourse on thingness might stimulate new norms that exert influence. If we need convincing, we might reflect on the fact that “[i]n the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” – the ultimate testimony to the power of the text if ever there was one.<sup>135</sup> The difference between this conception of matter and that of Bennett’s, pragmatically speaking, is not that this account is somehow magically self-seeding, but rather that its more intuitive character makes it more easily adapted and discussed within other frameworks – giving its ideals a longer shelf life. An

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133. National Geographic and GlobeScan, “Greendex 2014: Consumer Choice and the Environment – A Worldwide Tracking Survey,” accessed February 3, 2015, [http://images.nationalgeographic.com/wpf/media-content/file/2014\\_Global\\_Report-cb1411689801.pdf](http://images.nationalgeographic.com/wpf/media-content/file/2014_Global_Report-cb1411689801.pdf).

134. Ibid.

135. John 1:1.

analysis of the object such as this lends itself especially well to future research in the area of critical discourse analysis. As an approach to discourse that emphasizes the co-constitution of language and social practice, such a direction could probe how our treatment of the object as something naturally bare that has a human *telos* imposed upon it is reflected within the structures, meanings, and practices of language itself, and use these insights to continue the objectives of this work. We might thereby equip ourselves against, for instance, “[p]olitical spin doctors and corporate public relations departments [that], having mastered the art of ‘green speak,’ reassure us that our environmental concerns, as real as they are, are being handled attentively,” and that we can “continue to drive our SUV’s [*sic*] to fast-food franchises in support of the global beef market without any need for alarm or personal sacrifice.”<sup>136</sup> While I am careful to note that there is a real moral difference between the words we use to describe other members of our human community – members that we can accord the full rights and privileges of personhood – and the words we use to describe non-sentient beings, it is also worth pointing out that the cultural force of language re-labeling and re-appropriation in marginalized communities attests to the potential of a sensitive and/or adapted vocabulary. At a more macro level, consideration as to how the way that we talk about materiality can be echoed from within an interdiscursive context may glean some insights on how power structures propagate. This could provide a compelling case for how an investigation of the object *qua* object can still offer valuable insights for humanist projects.

On a sunny Tuesday afternoon 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, Jane Bennett managed to accomplish something as beautiful as it was important. It was not a feat of intellect, although its intellectual consequence was considerable. Nor was it a feat of strength, although its effect was powerful. On that sunny afternoon, Jane Bennett

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136. Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine, “Eco-Phenomenology: An Introduction,” in *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, ed. Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), x.

spontaneously achieved an elusive and ephemeral skill: the ability to speak the language of things. Bennett worries, in her text, about the problem of language, which raises its head like a Lernaean Hydra – for each signifier that emerges from our vocabulary from which she tries to rub out a human face, two new faces appear to spring. It might bode well for Bennett to take heed of the words of Merleau-Ponty, who insists that we will never come to the truth unless we “return to this origin, so long as we do not rediscover the primordial silence beneath the noise of words, and so long as we do not describe the gesture that breaks this silence. Speech is a gesture, and its signification is a world.”<sup>137</sup> Merleau-Ponty was, in fact, discussing the truth of “man [*sic*],” but the point remains a compelling one, if we maintain that the world and the subject are co-constituting. If we probe deeply enough, we find that our words cannot ever quite escape their natural underpinnings, no matter how ruthlessly anthropocentric we become; before these words, there was only a fulsome (human) silence in which objects spoke for themselves. In this sense, the language of things is both the easiest and most difficult to acquire. We may need words – specialized words, perhaps – to get there, but our own silence is our destination. With an ounce of humility, a gram of reflection, and a small measure of memory, we too might manage to hear our mother tongue, and – in so doing – pay proper respects to our universal material homeland.

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137. Merleau-Ponty, 190.

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