
Feature: Dialogues with Political Theorists

In this Dialogues with Political Theorists Feature, Gulshan Khan interviews Jane Bennett. We are delighted that the interviews in this feature will also be available on the journal's website at <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/cpt/index.html>.

Agency, nature and emergent properties: An interview with Jane Bennett

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Jane Bennett is Professor of Political Theory and Chair of the Department of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, USA. In 1986 she received her doctorate in Political Science from the University of Massachusetts. In the following year her dissertation was published with New York University Press under the title *Unthinking faith and enlightenment: nature and state in a post-Hegelian era*. Her subsequent published books include *Thoreau's Nature: Ethics, Politics, and the Wild* (Sage Publications, 1994) and *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton University Press, 2001). Her new book, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, is forthcoming from Duke University Press. In 1988 Bennett became an Assistant Professor at Goucher College in Baltimore, where she also became the *Elizabeth Todd Professor* in the year 2000 until 2004 when she moved to John Hopkins. She has been a visiting fellow at universities in Britain and in Australia. Bennett is on the editorial and advisory board of a number of prestigious journals and book series ranging from *Political Theory* to *Critical Horizons*.

Bennett co-edited *The Politics of Moralizing* (Routledge, 2002) with Michael J. Shapiro and co-edited *In the Nature of Things: Language, Politics and the Environment* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993) with William Chaloupka. She and William E. Connolly are in the beginning stages of co-writing a political theory textbook, *Friends of the Earth: Minor Voices in the History of Political Thought*. These encounters have contributed to Bennett's distinctive notion of 'vital materiality'. Her intellectual trajectory is also indebted to aspects of the work of Lucretius (1995), Spinoza (1949), Diderot (1996), Nietzsche (1994), Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Henry Thoreau (1968) and

Bruno Latour (1993). Her notion of 'vital materiality' also builds upon Michel Foucault's notion of bio-power and Judith Butler's early notion of 'bodies that matter'. Conversely, the notion of agency that stems from Bennett's work makes an important and substantive contribution, away from the politics of performativity associated with Butler and towards a politics of nonhuman matter and agency. She invokes a new and different political imaginary outside the Hegelian and psychoanalytic framework of the subject and object/other. In this sense her work shares a 'subject matter' as well an intellectual affinity with Elizabeth Grosz's (1994) Deleuzian inspired works. Following a long tradition of thinkers who have sought to de-centre 'the human' (for example, Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault), Bennett's emphasis on nonhuman matter challenges the ontological privileging of 'the human'. However, her approach creatively affirms the necessity of human embodiment, understood as one site of agency within and across a multiplicity of other material bodies and formations. Her notion of agency also seeks to avoid reducing politics to morality, which has implications for the predominant analytical framework that is heavily underpinned by a Kantian conception of moral agency with its emphasis on intuitions, duties and obligations. Bennett's contribution to political theory with its emphasis on nature, ethics, aesthetics, environmentalism and vitalism is inter-laced with a political interest in the literary writings of Kafka, Coetzee, Thoreau and Kundera, on whom she has published several articles and essays. Her work has clear implications for re-thinking our relations to and engagement with the vitality of nature.

Gulshan Khan: Jane, thanks for agreeing to this interview. I would like to begin by exploring some of the themes you are currently working on in your new book and issues raised by your paper presented at the 'Stem Cell Identities, Governance and Ethics' conference at Nottingham University in 2007.¹ I will then move onto questions about your theory about the enchantment of modernity, nature and agency.

You are currently working on a book entitled *Vital Materiality: The Political Life of Things* (forthcoming), and I find myself drawn to your version of post-structuralism, which does not reduce life or matter to the play of language. Instead, you outline a layered notion of reality and in particular you delineate a conception of matter as a lively force present in all things. You seem to want to challenge our received notions of the distinction between nature and culture. For example, in your article 'The force of things' (2004) you confront Theodor Adorno's (1990) point that we cannot make any positive claims about the 'non-identity' between the concept and the thing. By way of contrast, you offer an affirmative account of this non-identity

understood as the play of lively animate forces. Can I press you to explain your notion of 'things' or 'vital materiality' and how it differs from contending versions?

Jane Bennett: I'm trying to take 'things' more seriously than political theorists had been taking them. By 'things' I mean the materialities usually figured as inanimate objects, passive utilities, occasional interruptions or background context – figured, that is, in ways that give all the active, creative power *to humans*. I focus on five exemplary 'things' in the book: stem cells, fish oils, electricity, metal and trash. Our habit of parsing the world into passive matter (it) and vibrant life (us) is what Jacques Rancière (in another context) called a 'partition of the sensible'. In other words, it limits what we are able to sense; it places below the threshold of note the active powers of material formations, such as the way landfills are, as we speak, generating lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane, or the way omega-3 fatty acids can transform brain chemistry and mood, or the way the differential rates of cooling organize the unpredictable patterns of granite.

My experiment is this: What would the world look and feel like were the life/matter binary to fall into disuse, were it to be translated into differences in degree rather than kind? And how, in particular, would our political analyses of events change were they to acknowledge an elemental, *material agency* distributed across bodies, human and nonhuman? Who or what would count as a 'stakeholder'? How would a 'public' be constituted? Would politics become less centred around the punitive project of finding individual human agents responsible for the public problems of, say, an electricity blackout or an epidemic of obesity, and more concerned with identifying how the complex human–nonhuman assemblage that's churning out the negative effect holds itself together – how it endures or feeds itself? Until we do that, political attempts to remedy the problem are likely to be ineffective.

An 'assemblage' is an *ad hoc* grouping of an ontologically diverse range of actants, of vital materialities of various sorts. It is a vibrant, throbbing collective with an uneven topography: some of the points at which its diverse affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others, and thus power is not distributed equally across its surface. An assemblage has no sovereignty in the classical sense, for it is not governed by a central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently its trajectory or impact. The effects generated by an assemblage are, rather, emergent properties, emergent in that their ability to make something happen (a blackout, a hurricane, a war on terror) is distinct from the sum of the force of each materiality considered



alone. An assemblage thus has both a distinctive history of formation and a finite life span.

To be clear: the agency of assemblages of which I speak is not the strong kind of agency traditionally attributed to humans or God. My contention, rather, is that if one looks closely enough, the productive impetus of change is always a congregation. As my friend Ben Corson helped me to see, not only is human agency always already distributed to 'our' tools, microbes, minerals and sounds. It only emerges *as* agentic via its distribution into the 'foreign' materialities we are all too eager to figure as mere objects.

It is, I think, the 'responsibility' of humans to pay attention to the effects of the assemblages in which we find ourselves participating, and then to work experimentally to alter the machine so as to minimize or compensate for the suffering it manufactures. Sometimes it may be necessary to try to extricate your body from that assemblage, to refuse to contribute more energy to it, and sometimes to work to tilt the existing assemblage in a different direction. In a world where agency is always distributed, a hesitant attitude towards assigning moral blame becomes a virtue. Outrage should not disappear completely, but a politics devoted too exclusively to moral condemnation and not enough to a cultivated discernment of the web of agentic capacities can do little good. A moralized politics of good and evil, of singular agents who must be made to pay for their sins – be they Osama bin Laden or George W. Bush – becomes immoral to the degree that it legitimates vengeance and elevates violence to the tool of first resort. A distributive understanding of agency, then, re-invokes the need to detach ethics from moralism.

Gulshan Khan: What kind of materialist are you? How does your work differ from other models of materialism, for example: the Marxist model of 'dialectical materialism' and what we might call the 'materialism of the body' expressed in the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler? I am particularly interested to know whether or not you think we can make qualitative distinctions between desirable and non-desirable forms of matter? If all matter is characterized by an intrinsic vitality of forces, do these differ only in terms of their relative quantities and intensities, or could we perhaps use Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of active or reactive forces to evaluate them?

Jane Bennett: Mechanistic materialism does not attract me; it implicitly returns us to the status of consummate agents who run the machine. I am indebted to Spinoza's idea of a world of bodies that strive to enhance their power of activity by forming alliances with other bodies, to Diderot's picture of matter as a spiderweb of vibrating threads, to the Nietzsche for whom nature

is a 'play of forces and waves of forces, at the same time one and many', to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a 'material vitalism that doubtless exists everywhere but is ordinarily hidden', and to Bruno Latour's idea of nonhuman 'actants'.

I'm also drawn to Epicurean materialism because of its naturalist, immanentist sensitivity, because of its idea that there is a swerve or unpredictability built right into the heart of matter (the *clinamen*), and because of its faith that everything is made of the same quirky stuff, the same 'building blocks', if you will. Lucretius speaks of primordia; today we might call them atoms, quarks, particle-streams, matter-energy. This same-stuff claim, which insinuates that deep down all's connected, resonates with an *ecological sensibility*, and that is important to me. But in contrast to some versions of deep ecology, the oneness to which Epicureanism attests is neither a smooth harmony of parts nor a diversity unified by a common spirit. It is (as Michel Serres (2001) says about it in *The Birth of Physics*) a turbulent field in which various and variable materialities collide, congeal, morph and disintegrate.

Epicureanism is too simple in its imagery of individual atoms falling and swerving in the void, but I share its conviction that there is a natural tendency to the way things are – and that human decency and a decent politics are fostered to the extent that we are tuned-in to the strange logic of turbulence.

This ontological field of turbulence is heterogeneous, with lots of internal differences and differentiation. This differentiation is profound in the sense that there is no one key difference, no single red thread – 'this is human, this is not' – running through it. Any assemblage that forms and operates is a joint effort of human and nonhuman elements. An especially dogged resistance to anthropocentrism is perhaps the main difference between the 'vital materialism' I pursue and Marx's materialism, Foucault's biopower, and Judith Butler's early notion of bodies that matter. I emphasize, even over-emphasize, the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces (operative within 'external nature' but also within our bodies and artefacts), in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought, as well as the conception of a humanity created in the image of a god who cares about us above everything else. What counts as the material of vital materialism? Is it only human labour and the socio-economic entities made by men using raw materials? Or is materiality more potent than that? How can political theory do a better job of recognizing the active participation of nonhuman forces in every event and every stabilization? Is there a form of theory that can acknowledge a certain 'thing-power', that is, the irreducibility of objects to the human meanings or agendas they also embody?

More needs to be said about historical materialism and the place of a notion of active materiality within it: Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2008)



address this in an edited volume entitled the *New Materialisms*. I'll also demur on the complicated question of the materialism of the body in Foucault and Butler, except to say that the more one focuses on the activeness of the elements that compose the human body, the less sufficient the notion of the 'incorporation' or 'materialization' of human ideas and practices seems. The bodily incorporation of cultural processes is only one side of the story. Equally important are the persistent lines of connection between us and interior forces (for example, hormones, chemicals, micro-organisms) and between us-and-our-interior and the exterior milieu. What becomes appropriate is to explore the affinities between our bodily composition and that of nonhumans, both natural and artificial. I agree with Deleuze and Guattari when they say that 'a fibre stretches from a human to an animal, from a human or an animal to molecules, from molecules to particles, and so on to the imperceptible'.

One additional point about this 'vital materiality': I've found a rich source of ideas about materiality also in the tradition of 'vitalism' even though I do not endorse that tradition finally. Especially important are those early 20th century strands called 'critical' or 'modern' vitalism, whose advocates included Henri Bergson and Hans Driesch. These vitalists distinguished themselves from the 'naive vitalism' of soul by means of their close engagement with experimental science. They of course were anti-materialists of a sort, for many of the 'materialists' of their day (and some of our day) were mechanists for whom materiality is something that was in principle fully calculable. The critical vitalists did not think that nature is that simple. And so they struggled mightily both to remain *scientific* and to appreciate the incalculable dimension of things. They were attuned, not to an intrinsic purpose in things but to an excess that escapes quantification, prediction and control. They name that vital force 'life', *entelechy*, *elan vital*.

In their subtle attempts to give philosophical voice to the vitality of things, Driesch and Bergson came close to a vital materialism. But they stopped short: they could not imagine a *materiality* adequate to the vitality they discerned in natural processes. Instead, they dreamed of a life force of a non-material nature. Their vitalisms nevertheless fascinate me, in part because we share a common foe in mechanistic or deterministic materialism, and in part because the lively materiality of which I dream hovers close to a notion of vital force.

Gulshan Khan: Over the past 20 years a number of themes and concepts run through your work, which point in the direction of the notion of 'vital materiality'. These themes reappear in different ways in *Unthinking Faith and Enlightenment* (1987), *Thoreau's Nature* (1994) and *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (2001). Could you please elaborate a little on the genealogy of this

concept? Is the notion of intrinsic 'inter-connectedness' developed in *Unthinking Faith and Enlightenment* a precursor of the idea of vital materiality? How has this idea been modified over time and who or what has shaped the development of this idea into its current manifestation? What added directions does this concept take in your new book?

Jane Bennett: When I wrote *Unthinking Faith and Enlightenment*, I was trying to 'unthink' my way out of an oscillation, identified by Hegel in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, between two responses to a modernity conceived as haunted by meaninglessness, suffering, that is, from 'disenchantment'. On the one side was the 'enlightenment' response, which attempted to restore meaning by mastering or more thoroughly humanizing the world; on the other side was 'faith' or the attempt to re-enchant the world with a more modern (less sensuously present) form of divinity. In that book I didn't question the *diagnosis* of modernity as disenchanted (later I would); I accepted it, examined the pros and cons of the two responses, and then, finding both wanting, tried to imagine a better response (outside of a Hegelian frame).

The enlightenment response had negative implications for my ecological commitments, but the faith response conceived of nature as more purposive than my encounters with it warranted (especially with regard to my brother's struggle with schizophrenia). I then affirmed a stance called 'fractious holism', which remained true to the ecological slogan that everything is connected but rejected the idea that the connections were part of a pre-given, intelligent plan. The idea was that we should try to discern, and then more carefully engage, the frictions, noises, excesses and (though this idea was underdeveloped) surprising powers circulating through nature-culture.

Later, I turned to Thoreau's notion of the Wild to develop the idea of that fractiousness: yes, humans were 'part and parcel' of nature, but (internal and external) nature included that which was perverse or uncanny to it. Thoreau celebrated this wildness for the moral refreshment it could bring to a self that was also naturally attracted to conformity. Thoreau's idea of the Wild morphed, I now see, into the idea of 'vital materiality', a notion I first evoked in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*. That book was not an attempt to re-enchant the world with divinity but to bring to the fore the ways in which 'modernity' is always already filled with lively and enchanting, albeit non-purposive forces. In the book in progress now, I try to position the idea of lively matter within a larger history of philosophical materialisms. I guess that in each book, my ultimate aim has been to find ways to better cope – more artfully, more wisely – in a world that's neither a divine creation, docile matter, nor completely lawful.

Gulshan Khan: You say that your brother's struggle with schizophrenia caused you to question the idea of nature as purposive. I hope you don't mind if I



probe you a bit further on this. Could you elaborate on the problems associated with understanding nature as having an explicit design and how this has influenced you in theorizing an alternative conception of nature that cannot be fully mastered and has no inner *telos*? How have your experiences with your brother's struggle with schizophrenia led you to question or support medical discourses on 'madness', 'abnormality' or 'difference'?

Jane Bennett: To put the point bluntly, a sustained encounter with madness will eventually erode belief in a providential nature. And it makes belief in classical scientific conceptions of a law-like nature more difficult too. Or at least that is what happened to me. Like most people in my (Italian-Catholic and Irish-Catholic) neighbourhood, I grew up with the idea that the world was a divine creation and that external nature, or the animals, vegetables and minerals that surrounded us, was designed according to a divine plan. This article of faith was for me set in a liberation-theology-inflected Catholicism (a Catholicism pretty much dismissed by the Vatican today), according to which Jesus is a counter-cultural peace activist, a nature-lover who, like the Franciscans, Gandhi and Thoreau, practiced 'voluntary simplicity' when it came to the consumption of material goods. These beliefs were an important part of the rationale for the Earth Day environmentalism I affirmed in the 1970s: if nature was God's handiwork, it was worthy of care and protection, and we ought to tread lightly upon it.

It was in 1980 that my then 16-year-old brother (a common onset age for schizophrenia) had his first psychotic episode. (He jumped off the garage roof because he thought he could fly.) He has been in and out of madness, in and out of hospitals ever since. (Though in the last 10 years the legal policies in the US are such that it has become effectively impossible to hospitalize someone against his/her will, which means that the jails are filled with people suffering from mental illness.) If you live with a person living with a brain that periodically malfunctions in dramatic ways – coherent sentences can no longer be formed, laughing loses its link to a funny situation or even an amusing thought but erupts independently of any social or psychic meaning, the movement of ants on the sidewalk or cars on the highway appear as sinister plots – you can easily lose interest in the idea of a purposive or providential natural order. (The notion of nature as a purposive plan starts to seem like the mirror image of my brother's perverse conviction that the impersonal behaviour of ants and the anonymous movements of traffic are out to get him. Both assume purposiveness.) And the classical science figure of nature as law-like also loses much of its power.

The misery caused by the diminishment of the lives of those whose brain doesn't work right will make it hard to believe in *either* a benevolent

god-creator or in a Newtonian world where the eternal laws of nature correspond to the mind of a law-giving God. The figure of matter as an active power capable both of (undesigned) self-organization and of aleatory alteration becomes more credible if and when you forsake those two contending conceptions of divinity.

I support medical – in the sense of bio-chemical – discourses on schizophrenia. Though of course it is true that social conditions, family contexts and psychic structures are also involved, they do not alone seem to have the power to fix many types of breakdown of the organic machinery. I support research in brain science and experimentation with pharmacological agents that might re-calibrate the delicate chemistry that makes thinking possible – or, I would go so far as to say, that (almost) *is* thinking.

The political-theoretical impact of my experiences with schizophrenia is this: I needed to find a new basis for my lingering commitment to a green politics, to a way of life that was more ecologically sustainable, less poisonous of the water, air, soil and thus of human bodies. I needed a figure of nature that did not rely so heavily on what my friend Hent DeVries calls a 'theological archive' of images, concepts and narratives. The figure of 'vital materiality' or lively matter is one such candidate for that role.

Gulshan Khan: Throughout your work you have suggested that an appreciation of the liveliness of nonhuman matter can help us to live ethically, and you maintain that we ignore this at our own peril. Could you explain how an understanding of the vitality of matter enables us to live ethically? Perhaps you could answer this with reference to the environmental crisis, the problems of climate change, exponential human population growth and so on? For example, you share Martin Heidegger's (1977) concern that modern science typically treats nature as 'standing reserve' as a passive object to be manipulated and controlled for basic human utility. His ideas have been mobilized by some in the direction of a deep green political praxis. Does your work point in a similar direction? Or do you see a more positive role for modern science and technology, understood as one force amongst many in the world? Should we extend ethical generosity to all living matter including those which are harmful to human beings such as viruses, diseases and tropical storms?

Jane Bennett: I think that the relationship between an enhanced sense of the vitality of things and ethical life is indirect, although indirection can sometimes be the most effective tactic. It is a matter of possible alliances and mutual reinforcement of tendencies – an ancillary and meandering connection subject to many intervening forces. In the context of, in particular, an American political economy, there seems to be a resonance

between the idea of matter as dull stuff/passive resource and a set of gigantically wasteful production and consumption practices that foul our own nest. These practices endanger and immiserate workers, children, animals and plants here and abroad. To the extent that the figure of inert matter sustains this consumptive style, another figure might disrupt it. It isn't a coincidence that Kant, when he talks about natural objects at the end of the *Critique of Judgment*, affirms together that '(the essential character of matter is lifelessness, *inertia*)' and that man, as 'the only being on earth that has ... an ability to set himself purposes in his own choice', holds 'the title of lord of nature'.

With regard to Heidegger's notion of standing-reserve, I agree that it can be put to Green use, though I don't pursue that task. I don't because Heidegger longs to recapture a sense of the universe as an encompassing whole in which nature and culture engage in a kind of primordial cooperation (even if that system of relations fades off into indefiniteness and incalculability). I too am critical of the picture of nature as calculable mechanism. But I am attracted to a more 'pagan' conception of materiality – as turbulent, energetic and capable of emergent forms of self-organization. It is worthy of our respect because we are composed of it, because we enter into various relations of dependence with it, and because its force fields can turn on us if we don't attend closely to them.

So, should we, for example, love HIV? I don't know if we *should* love HIV – I don't believe in a creator God and so I can't imagine the universe as an intrinsically moral order – but I don't think that we *can* love HIV. It is associated with too much suffering. But its vitality nevertheless demands respect, more respect than was at the base of our initial attempt to *eradicate* the virus, which often resulted in killing the patient. The more *effective* therapy now aims to keep the viral load low, enabling a tense coexistence between human and nonhuman. It is also good to recall the vast array of vital materialities that were enlisted in response to HIV, the condoms, the laboratory instruments, the animals tested, as well as the revised sexual practices and rituals of human bodies.

Gulshan Khan: In *The Enchantment of Modern Life* you develop a polemical critique of the idea – associated particularly with Max Weber (1981) (but also many others) – that modernity is characterized by a progressive disenchantment of the world. Common to the various narratives of disenchantment is the idea that the emergence of modern scientific rationality has radically transformed our understanding of nature, greatly extending the capacity for human agency in a world, but at the cost of devaluing nonhuman matter, which has come to be seen as lifeless, inert and devoid of enchantment or vitality. Your alternative narrative emphasizes the enchantment of the modern

experience of the world. For example, you suggest that claims about the uniqueness of modern rationality are exaggerated, and that under conditions of modernity social and political systems have become more complex but there is no fundamental break with the enchanted world of pre-modernity. However, for many theorists such as Jürgen Habermas (1987) modern rationality is also bound up with the question of political legitimacy and with the potential for an emancipated society free from arbitrary forms of power. He argues that under conditions of modernity political power is progressively disentangled from established tradition and 'irrational' forms of knowledge and superstition, and tied instead to rational procedures and due process. Does your counter narrative of the various continuities between modernity and pre-modernity enable us to draw a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate forms of power?

Jane Bennett: I'm not exactly saying that there is no fundamental break with the enchanted world of pre-modernity. Clearly things have changed, especially with regard to what is plausibly considered to be the ultimate source of the power of things to provoke a mood of 'enchantment' in humans. If the natural world was once enchanted with divine will and intentionality (forming an episteme that Foucault called 'the prose of the world'), my claim is that something akin to that wonder can persist even without the postulate of a God who is actively infused into all facets of the sensible world. Today things can and do enchant people by virtue of their material complexity, or by their sheer this-ness, or by their refusal to fit into the categories we bring to bear upon them.

I think that those moments when things call us up short and reveal our profound implication in nonhumanity are relevant, perhaps even indispensable, to ethical action. For such action requires a bodily comportment conducive to the enactment of 'good will' or generosity toward others. What Spinoza called the 'joyful' affects are needed to feed or energize a body called upon – by reason, habit, sympathy or some unnamed motive – to love, forgive or treat with compassion others, or to do as little violence as possible in one's actions.

So of course I affirm the 'rationalizing' project of disentangling political power from oppressive traditions, and of the norms of due process and the rule of law. But the will to contest oppressive effects must itself be induced, and the norms of due process and democratic rule are not self-enacting. In each case, they require aesthetic-affective energy to spark or fuel them. If, for example, the American public is to be aroused to repudiate torture as a tool of foreign policy and re-endorse the Geneva conventions, the fearful and vengeful mood now prevalent must be altered. If Americans are to change established modes of energy production and consumption (to avoid



catastrophic climate change and to decrease the social violence it is already entailing), we will need to stop thinking of earth as a basket of passive resources for the satisfaction of desires.

Gulshan Khan: For many modern thinkers, the distinction between the human and the nonhuman remains highly significant. For example, Heidegger (1998) insists on the uniqueness of Man as a 'being that questions its own Being', Hannah Arendt (1958) demarcates humans from other creatures in terms of the ability to act together politically, and Habermas (1984) singles out the fact of communication – understood as action orientated towards reaching understanding – as the specific faculty that raises humans out of nature. By way of contrast, you have sought to deliberately challenge the distinction between human and nonhuman matter and instead emphasize points of commonality between them. Furthermore, many thinkers attribute a capacity for agency – and particularly the faculty for responsible (moral or ethical) action – solely to human beings. Again, by way of contrast, you draw attention to the fact that (despite their best intentions) the actions of human individuals often have effects beyond their intended consequences, and you suggest that forms of nonhuman matter possess agency to a certain degree. Indeed, one innovative (and highly provocative) element of your approach is that you do not restrict the notion of agency to humans alone. Do you think there is any distinction to be drawn between the human and the nonhuman in terms of a capacity for agency? By attributing agency to nonhuman matter is there not a danger that the criterion for responsible human action is dissolved?

Jane Bennett: I think that *human* agency is best conceived as itself the outcome or effect of a certain configuration of human and nonhuman forces. When humans act they do not exercise exclusively human powers, but express and engage a variety of other actants, including food, micro-organisms, minerals, artefacts, sounds, bio- and other technologies, and so on. There is a difference between a human individual and a stone, but neither *considered alone* has real agency. The locus of agency is always a human–nonhuman collective. One example I work with in the *Vital Materialism* book is the agency behind the electricity blackout in 2003 in North America (and later in the year, in Europe). The government and industry response in the US was to identify some human – some Enron executive or energy trader – who was responsible and then to punish him. Meanwhile, the relations between the infrastructure of the grid, the legislation deregulating energy trading, the structure of consumptive desire and the natural tendencies of electricity remained unchanged. The danger of blackouts remains the same. The fetish of the exclusively human agent and the tendency to define

social problems as moral failures – and their implicit assumption that we are in charge – prevented us from discerning the real locus of agency and attempting to alter its configuration. I don't say, then, that single, nonhuman actants are agents. I do say that agency itself is located in the complex interinvolvement of humans and multiple nonhuman actants, which together form an effective assemblage. So, an actant is any single force with the capacity to make a difference, and an agent is a more complex formation made up of a variety of actants. Humans too are emergent and complex phenomena, which means that the intervener does not fully pre-exist the intervention.

My point is really a pragmatic one: ethics and politics have more traction on material assemblages and the way they reproduce patterns of effects than they can have on that elusive spiritual entity called the 'moral subject'.

Gulshan Khan: In *The Enchantment of Modern Life* you explore the power of commodities to enchant us. You agree with Marx about the mystifying nature of the commodity. However, you argue that his understanding of commodity fetishism – as well as Adorno and Horkheimer's (1972) work on 'The Culture Industry' that builds up upon Marx's analysis – is insufficient to explain the fascination with commodities and the power of advertising in contemporary capitalist society. As you see it, there is something extra in the modern desire for commodities that escapes the deadening power of mystification, and if I have understood you correctly your approach does not seek to eliminate the commodity form, but rather to reform commodity culture by making capitalism more ecologically sustainable and by drawing out the ethical potential with it. How would you respond to a leftist sceptic: can advertisements really generate ethical forms of behaviour when the objects they promote are likely to have been produced in the developing world under conditions of sweat shop labour and gross exploitation? Is it not true that advertising creates and generates desires whose fulfilment manifests as consumption patterns that are destructive of human life and the environment? How can your emphasis on the elements of enchantment in modern capitalism help oppressed people resist and challenge the superficial desires created by capitalist entrepreneurs and help bring about a more equitable society?

Jane Bennett: Since I had been arguing that cultural artefacts (and not only nature) had the power to enchant and that this power could become ethical, I wanted to examine a hard case: enchantment issuing from the commodified object. In particular, I focused on the GAP's khakis pants, or, to be more precise, on the television advertisement for them where young men and women clad in beige material danced to swing music.



I don't believe in God, magic, pantheism or the (almost-convincing) panpsychism defended by Freya Mathews in her *For Love of Matter* (2003) and *Reinhabiting Reality* (2004). I am a materialist girl living in a material world, and I take my enchantment where I can get it. When I watched the GAP commercial, I was enchanted. It animated in my body, and presumably in others, a certain pleasurable energy or vitality. But what kind of relationship did this affect bear to the intentions of its artistic creators? My answer was that, like electricity, the charged affect generated by the commercial was an unruly, swerving force, one apt to overflow the design of its corporate sponsor. This suggests that corporate capitalism cannot be all-powerful, and that the affective energy it generates might be put to other uses. For affects, once let loose or put into play, have a degree of independence from their creators. To be too committed to the idea that capitalism recaptures entirely all the forces it unleashes is to turn capitalism into a (perhaps evil) god and us into its servants or victims.

My aim was not to defend existing capitalism or even to idealize a more ecologically sustainable form of capitalism, though I do think it would be foolish to oppose the latter just because you favour more radical changes in the political economy. My goal was to explore how the mood of enchantment *works*: what were its tendencies, its typical path of development, its aetiology? How does it sometimes manage to activate or enliven human action?

In your question, you worry that even if enchantment can sometimes motivate acts of ethical generosity, doesn't it matter whether the source or provocateur of enchantment is itself an ethical agent? Could generosity issue from an encounter with an advertisement designed to get consumers to desire khakis for this season only (designed, that is, as part of an economy of waste), and also designed to obscure from view the working conditions of the people who assemble the slacks (designed, that is, as part of an economy of exploitation)? My 'yes, it can' answer is based on a theory of affect as a wayward force able to ally itself with a wide variety of semantic contents and political projects. I also said that acknowledgment of the attraction of commodities needs to be combined with a commitment to reorganize work and the established patterns of consumption.

The point I elided when I wrote the chapter, however, was this: the promiscuity of affect means that it will *also* be unfaithful to any ethical re-deployment of it. I should have thought more about how to cope with or compensate for that fact, and because I didn't, it sounded easier than it is to transform commodity enchantment into non-commercial or counter-hegemonic modes of activity.

What I continue to affirm is the way commercials, by technologically animating the materialities that we normally experience as inert, dead or beneath notice, pose a challenge to the life/matter binary, which is also at the base of the system of exploitation. I found in this high-tech refusal to depict matter as merely passive a potential ally in my own project to re-think what materiality is and does in the world. The infectious energy of the GAP ad issued from the moving human bodies on the screen, from the sounds and rhythms of the humanly composed music, but *also from the khakis themselves*.

This animism was what the ad men sought: viewers would associate vitality (or youth or life) with GAP khakis and, because vitality is attractive, desire the pants. This would not work were the dancing pants to be joined, in the full picture, by the exploited, fatigued and stressed bodies of the assembly-workers. But in calling its viewers to a pagan sensibility – to the childhood idea that matter is alive, that ordinary, nonhuman things have powers over us – the advert nevertheless produced affective effects in excess of its intentions or of the moral compass of its authors.

Let me end by saying that what I try to do when I write is to call myself and others to a different direction, to point to those uneven spaces where nonhumans are actants, where agency is always an assemblage, where matter is not inert, where man is not lord, where everything is made of the same quirky stuff. We regularly traverse these spaces but tend to pass through them without paying attention. To inhabit them more fully is to find ourselves speaking new words, having new feelings, taking on new postures and practices, making adjustments to the pace and scope and ranking of our encounters with the 'outside'. I can't predict what kind of politics would result from this. My hunch is that the grass would be greener in a world of vital materialities.

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