

**God and the Meaning of Matter:  
Theological Engagements with the New  
Materialisms**

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## Abstract

Post-structuralism and feminism have been uneasy allies in feminism's third wave. Critics of feminism's cultural turn are calling for a critical theory and emancipatory politics that takes materiality as its starting point, without losing the central insights gained in radical attention to the operation of power through language. This thesis explores the promise of the "new materialist" turn for addressing the crisis of post-structural emancipatory politics, and seeks a theological engagement with the ontological propositions of some central figures implicated in this theoretical shift, including Diana Coole and Karen Barad. Taking up Jane Bennett's argument that Christianity is inherently dualistic and that divine transcendence supports a life/matter binary, this thesis uses Rowan Williams's articulation of the doctrine of creation to respond to the implication that the Christian understanding of divine transcendence is incompatible with non-dichotomous accounts of culture and nature or meaning and matter. The doctrines of creation *ex nihilo* and divine transcendence (which assert a fundamental dichotomy, rather than a dualism, between God and creation) prompt us to think of creation as a material, finite, and vital whole. Williams's theology of language moreover suggests that reflection on the non-dichotomy of matter and meaning may be one way into a reflection on the existence of a transcendent God.

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## Introduction

If post-structuralism and feminism have been allies within feminism's third wave, it has been an uneasy alliance. In the wake of the "cultural" turn, many feminist theorists claim that despite the ways in which this critical theory has made feminist discourse more accommodating of "difference", the political agency of the movement has been undercut by the new orthodoxy, which states that if subjects are constructed by the discourses that purport to emancipate them, to highlight the oppression of people bearing certain identities is to construct those very identities. Collective political action, which demands the organisation of people under the banner of shared interests, has become more difficult with the awareness of this problem. Moreover, the constructivist account, which aimed to deconstruct the binaries which serve patriarchy (among them the culture/nature and language/matter binaries) has arguably served to further entrench these binaries by granting constructive power to language alone. Matter is presented as a passive entity, the "stuff" that language works on.

Yet a return to naïve realism would not be desirable for feminism because of its associations with biological essentialism, and out of engagement with this conundrum, a group of feminist theorists are calling for approaches to the construction of identity which take the agency of matter into account. The new materialist feminists are a diverse group of theorists operating from within a variety of disciplines. Their work is to challenge the unilateral ascription of constructive power to language, without either losing the central insights of post-structuralism, or falling back into Cartesian or representationalist models for the relation between matter and meaning.

Can theologians make a constructive contribution within the new materialist conversation? Some significant voices within the new materialisms express their doubts. This thesis is an attempt to take up the challenge that these voices put to dogmatic Christian claims. It seeks to demonstrate that the terms on which these theorists believe theology should be excluded from the discourse are problematic. Its specific focus will be on the question of whether the doctrines of creation and of divine transcendence can be hospitable to non-dichotomous conceptions of matter and meaning. Towards this end, the discussion will be divided into three parts.

Chapter One will look at feminism in its third wave, with attention to what we have called the “uneasy alliance” between constructivism/post-structuralism and feminism. Emerging responses to the problems of third-wave feminism as we have just presented them will be explored. From here we will look closely at the work of Karen Barad and Diana Coole as theorists who are active in theorising the relationship between matter and meaning at the ontological level, in ways that feed constructively into more practical propositions for emancipatory political movements. Their ontologies bear certain resemblances to each other, and these similarities will be noted so that the contours of a new materialist ontological position can be sketched. Within their accounts, matter is presented as active both in meaning-making, and in the construction of the subjects and objects of discourse. The material existence from which knowledge practices emerge is presented as an unstable and innovative whole.

Chapter Two will ask whether the doctrine of creation can allow for the kinds of ontological reflections that Barad and Coole are engaged in. Could such a doctrine even sponsor non-dichotomous thought? Taking up Jane Bennett’s argument that Christianity is inherently dualistic and that divine transcendence supports a life/matter binary, this chapter will use the work of Rowan Williams to propose the contrary. The doctrines of creation *ex nihilo* and divine transcendence (which assert a fundamental dichotomy, rather than a dualism, between God and creation), far from presenting creation as an act of cultural power over an inert matter, may actually prompt us to think of creation as a material, finite, and vital whole. Humans, according to Christian theology, are embedded within this created whole, imaging God precisely through their acceptance of materiality and finitude.

Chapter Three will push this idea about the compatibility of divine transcendence with ontological monism further – again with reference to Williams – by elucidating Williams’s proposition that thinking about the non-dichotomy of matter and meaning may be one way into a reflection on the existence of a transcendent God. Bennett claims that Christianity, as a naïve form of vitalism, takes the mechanistic nature of matter as given, and slots God into the gaps that inhere in this model in order to explain the mystery of innovative “life”. But Williams’s theology of language drives between the poles of dualism and physicalism and posits a universe in which intelligence is an implicate feature of materiality. Our discussion will show how Williams’s understanding of language as material feeds into his argument for a natural theology re-conceived in the

tradition of Aquinas : the conclusion will be drawn that Williams's interest in moving beyond binary thought sits compatibly within an account in which God and creation are fundamentally "other". Our exploration of Williams's natural theology will also help us to demonstrate that Christian thought is not dependent on positing a "god of the gaps", and it therefore does not have interests to defend where mechanistic materialism is concerned.

Some final comments will tie these themes together, and the conclusion will be drawn that there is a productive and mutually beneficial dialogue to be had between theology and the new materialisms. Some directions for further research will be suggested in this concluding section.

## Chapter 1

# Introducing the New Materialisms: Matter and Meaning in the Crisis of Identity Politics

I hereby acknowledge and affirm that the Hooters concept is based on female sex appeal and that the work environment is one in which joking and innuendo based on female sex appeal is commonplace...I also expressly acknowledge and affirm I do not find my duties, uniform requirements or work environment to be intimidating, hostile or unwelcome.<sup>1</sup>

The above is a contractual clause which United States employees of “Hooters”, an American restaurant chain with establishments in the United Kingdom, are required to sign as a condition of employment. When a Hooters bar opened in Sheffield in 2008, rather than voice their opposition in terms of the structural “sexism” of the sex trade, the local Sheffield Fems opted to mount their argument against the bar on the grounds that it would be “tacky”. This example is used by Kath and Sophie Woodward to illustrate the malaise of feminism in its third wave, a phenomenon which it has become common-place for feminist writers of the second wave to lament. Groups like the Sheffield Fems, it seems, are bound now to making tactical choices based on which arguments are more likely to garner popular favour in a time of dwindling support:<sup>2</sup> young women, even those who take the feminist label, no longer rally around the same banners as their predecessors.

Amongst the confluences that have led to this inertia – a neoliberal market mentality sponsoring freedom of individual choice,<sup>3</sup> combining with a popular belief that the work of feminism was completed with the liberal feminist achievement of equality under the law –<sup>4</sup> another explanation points to the effects of the “cultural turn”, and the alliance between constructivist and post-structuralist theories, and feminism, that has

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<sup>1</sup> Hooters Contract Clause, cited in Kath and Sophie Woodward, *Why Feminism Matters: Feminism Lost and Found* (Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 106.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

characterised the third wave.<sup>5</sup> In the wake of these critical theories an awareness prevails that to evoke a politics of difference is always to implicate sameness or homogeneity.<sup>6</sup> The Sheffield Fems could not refer to structural sexism without presuming to speak for “women”, that is, without reinforcing the same “linguistically constructed” category which has led to the oppression of people identified with that marker.

This chapter seeks to explore the crisis of feminism following the impact of the “cultural turn”, through an engagement with social constructivism, and more specifically with Judith Butler. Substantive criticisms of Butler and of constructivism more generally will be taken up, and the discussion will move into a treatment of certain responses that are emerging within feminist theory, out of critical engagements with the problems that inhere within the “cultural turn”. These problems principally include the entrenchment of the culture/nature binary that this turn has occasioned, as well as post-structuralism’s presentation of matter as a passive entity awaiting human inscription. The discussion will nevertheless attempt to explore ways in which the kinds of anxieties and questions driving the post-structuralist critique may have been inevitable. This is given the prevalence of an ontological paradigm – variously referred to as Cartesianism, or “representationalism” – that constructivists and post-structuralists have attempted to engage critically with, but have failed (we will argue) to go beyond. Our chapter will explore a collection of diverse thinkers under the banner of “the new materialist feminisms”, whose work remains sympathetic with (even dependent on) many of the central insights of post-structuralism, but who are working to move feminist theory forwards in ways that recover a sense of the agency of matter. Karen Barad and Diana Coole will be explored in this capacity, as offering possible ontological alternatives to the Cartesian/representationalist model. As will be demonstrated with reference to the work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Tobin Siebers, Barad’s and Coole’s proposed alternatives (which bear certain resemblances to each other) are a promising entry into feminist discourse, given the possibilities they recover for political agency after the crisis of identity politics.

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<sup>5</sup> Henceforth I try to separate the general category of social constructivism from the label post-structuralism which is more associated with Butler. This picks up on the fact that the criticisms of the “linguistic turn” that I have highlighted as central to emerging materialisms are focussed around Butler, whose work is to a great extent built on that of Michel Foucault. A distinction is often drawn in such discussions between Butler’s work and the more linguistically focussed work of other social constructivists. Butler’s theory of performativity highlights discursive practices and so is seen by some to emphasise the material, though the consensus is that matter is still a passive entity within her thought.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

## i) The Uneasy Alliance of Post-Structuralism and Feminism

If constructivism has negatively affected the political mobilization of the feminist movement, far from being lauded, this has confirmed only the worst fears of feminist academics and scholars implicated in that shift, many of whom considered themselves to have been writing (critically) from within feminism.<sup>7</sup> The deconstruction of the sex/gender binary was intended as a complicating and emancipatory move, troubling the neat divide made use of by second wavers in order to avoid biological essentialist justifications for the subordination of women.<sup>8</sup> Feminist theory has often focussed on establishing the primordial causes of patriarchy, the historical or psychic turning point at which the biological female is “transformed into a socially subordinate woman”.<sup>9</sup> The sex/gender distinction held out the possibility of policing the border between nature and culture to catch genderization in process. But a number of related objections to this framework could be made. First, all of the core binaries grounding Western thought and discourse, feminists have argued – mind/body, culture/nature, subject/object – have been gendered male/female,<sup>10</sup> and have been structured in hierarchical relationships of substance/lack. Any reproduction of the culture/nature binary must therefore be suspect for feminism, since it threatens to confirm and reproduce the same asymmetries that sustain patriarchy. Second, the strong historical-cultural association of women with the body and with nature means that where a sex/gender distinction is posited, sex determines only female gender: as Simone Beauvoir famously argued, the universal “subject” is always already masculine and disembodied. Only women have a sex.<sup>11</sup>

The work of post-structuralists like Judith Butler was therefore to dismantle the category of sex altogether, showing sex to have been gender all along. Brief attention to the central claims of Butler’s work is necessary here, since, although much of her early work was a reformulation and extension of theories of sex already partially developed by proponents like Michel Foucault and Monique Wittig, her position has become perhaps the most well-known, and most controversial in the postmodern/post-structuralist shift,

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<sup>7</sup> See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), vii.

<sup>8</sup> Asberg, Cecilia and Lynda Birke, “Biology is a feminist issue: Interview with Lynda Birke,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 17:4 (2010): 419.

<sup>9</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 47.

<sup>10</sup> Stacy Alaimo and Susan Heckman, “Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory,” in *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Heckman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Woodward, “Why Feminism Matters”, 143.

and as we shall see, many theorists seeking to move beyond constructivism find themselves needing first to engage with Butler.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that certain ways of framing the question of gender in feminist discourse foreclose the discussion in certain respects. There can be no pure “descriptions” of gender, she warns, only normative operations.<sup>12</sup> The sex/gender divide smuggles in an assumption that ought to be open to dispute, namely that gender and sex are in principle discontinuous, gender being an unstable social interpretation of the more immutable category of “sex”.<sup>13</sup> Feminists, rather than assuming such a reality as “sex” exists, should be “interrogating the discourses which purport to establish such ‘facts’ for us”.<sup>14</sup>

Butler’s distinctive position on the production of “sex” as “fact” takes its bearing from Foucault, and from her Foucaultian disagreement with psychoanalysis.<sup>15</sup> Criticising psychoanalytic theorists for romanticising the notion of a pure maternal sexuality prior to the “paternal law”, Butler argues that an exclusive focus on a prohibitive concept of the law fails to do justice to its generative force.<sup>16</sup> If we reformulate our theory of the paternal law, casting it as power rather than prohibition, we will see that the law produces both “sanctioned” sexuality, *and* its transgressive or “repressed” forms.<sup>17</sup> In Foucault’s work on the punishment of criminals, the law operates on bodies externally to “compel their bodies to signify the prohibitive law as their very essence, style, and necessity.”<sup>18</sup> Far from being internalised, the law produces interiority itself: “bodies are produced which signify the law on and through the body.”<sup>19</sup> The operation of the law, once it is reified through incorporation, masks the prior fact of external social inscription. In Foucault then, power is always both productive and elusive, the law operating to construct reality,

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<sup>12</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxi.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> This relationship is somewhat complicated by the fact that Butler believed Foucault’s work on sexuality to have some troubling convergences with psychoanalysis. Foucault’s own homosexuality, Butler suggests, gave his theory of “sex” an emancipatory thrust which reads against his own best insights. Foucault’s interpretation of the case of the hermaphrodite, Herculine, romanticises Herculine’s sexuality as the unregulated play of multiplicity before the law. This sounds (to Butler) uncomfortably close to the psychoanalytic positing of a primary sexuality and an antecedent law. See *ibid.*, 135.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

while simultaneously constructing “a narrative account of its genealogy” which masks its own means of operation.<sup>20</sup> Might sexuality not operate in analogous terms, asks Butler?

“Sex”, in this understanding would not be prior to the law, but rather an *effect* posing as a *cause*.<sup>21</sup> Out of an external compulsion (an incest taboo and a prohibition on homosexuality),<sup>22</sup> we are compelled through discourse from birth to *perform* certain gender identities. The literalizing effect of this performance is the organisation of matrices of desire and pleasure around signifying body parts. Within these matrices the very boundaries of the body are established, and an interiority we come to understand as “sexuality” materialises. In the naturalising of this interiority through bodily habit, the body comes to seem like the cause of desire, rather than its occasion.<sup>23</sup> This collective illusion of a stable “self” as the origin of sexual desire is sustained in regulatory practices that hide the external political origins of heterosexuality from view.<sup>24</sup> Presumably such practices include the punishment of homosexuality as “unnatural”, medical discourses and practices which promote the view of differentiated body parts as the natural cause of sexual pleasure, and psychological therapies which locate the origin of sexual desire in the “self”. Butler hints in these directions but does not often provide detailed analyses of precise situations for the operation of power.

Butler’s political prescriptions for feminism develop out of her insistence on gender as pure act, or “performativity”. Some performances of gender - its complete subversion through the practice of drag, ironic appropriations of femininity by “female bodies”, or the practice of homosexuality – can, through parody, rob heterosexuality of its claims to stability. In effect, doing gender as a conscious performance, wearing gender knowingly as a mask, will reveal the unsettling fact that nothing exists behind the mask for anybody. Parodic performances of gendered identity are in this way like copies of a copy.<sup>25</sup>

The dismantling of sex/gender has been important for highlighting the kinds of imbrications between sex and gender that a binary model obscures, and many have found Butler convincing, particularly when she is read alongside biologists like Anne Fausto-

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 176.

Sterling, whose findings are often seen as “consonant with Butler’s argument for the fluidity and contingency of sex”.<sup>26</sup> Even our bones, an aspect of our human life we regard as purely material, can be shown to “carry information about gender and race and are constituted through the life experience of individuals in particular economic and political regimes.”<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, through drawing attention to the operation of power through language, and through simultaneously unmooring “identity” from the stability of a material anchor, post-structuralist feminists at least sought to put what theorists have called the “simultaneity of oppression”, or “multiplicity” at the centre of feminist thought.<sup>28</sup> Critics of second wave feminism often argue that the political movement was centred on the needs of white, bourgeois, heterosexual women.<sup>29</sup> The audacity to speak authoritatively about the collective experiences of women as a political and social class, which gave the movement its efficacy, arguably led to the further marginalisation of individuals whose membership in more than one oppressed class (for example “Black” and “women”) meant that the negative impacts of both patriarchy and racism were compounded. As Michael Hames-Garcia contends, to be understood in terms of one marker of one’s identity, such as sexuality, is to be “understood in terms of the most dominant construction of that identity”.<sup>30</sup> This is problematic since it leads to the assumption that multiple identities merely “intersect”, where in fact an operation of “mutual constitution” is at work. To be gay and Chicano, Hames-Garcia points out, more often means to belong in neither group, than to belong in both.<sup>31</sup> Multiplicity in this way is profoundly alienating. It is clear then why a radical problematizing of the category of identity with attention to the way in which language can render people and their particular interests opaque, and a questioning of the use of identity markers in a politics of difference, seemed at one time tempting.

But if Butler has been commended for shifting the spotlight to the margins, the reception of her work has been mixed. Martha Nussbaum, in her (bordering on vitriolic)

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<sup>26</sup> Woodward, “Why Feminism Matters”, 139.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Patricia Hill Collins coined the former term, while “multiplicity” is used by Michael R. Hames Garcia, see Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” *Social Problems*, 33:6 (December, 1986): 19; Michael R. Hames-Garcia, “Who Are Our Own People,” in *Reclaiming Identity*, edited by Paula M.L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-Garcia (Berkeley, LA and London: University of California Press, 2000), 102-129.

<sup>29</sup> Rosemary Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, Third Edition (Colorado: Westview Press, 2009), 43.

<sup>30</sup> Hames-Garcia, “Who Are Our Own People”, 104.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 104-106.

1999 article for *The New Republic*, “Professor of Parody”, accuses Butler of convincing “scores of talented women that they need not work on changing the law, or feeding the hungry, or assailing power through theory harnessed to material politics.”<sup>32</sup> Butler’s insistence that the best hope for the marginalised is to make subversive symbolic gestures at oppressive structures might be compared, according to Nussbaum, to telling “a slave that the institution of slavery will never change, but you can always find ways of mocking it.”<sup>33</sup> The point is that structural and material changes were achieved by feminists in the past, and, especially when our outlook moves beyond Western centrism, there is more of this work to be done. We have cause to question which marginalised people Butler has in sights, argues Nussbaum, when we find her arguing “that we all eroticize the power structures that oppress us” so that “Real change...would make sexual satisfaction impossible.”<sup>34</sup> It is here Nussbaum clearly loses patience with Butler’s programme for “political” action: “For women who are hungry, illiterate, disenfranchised, beaten, raped, it is not sexy or liberating to re-enact, however parodically, the conditions of hunger, illiteracy, disenfranchisement, beating, and rape.”<sup>35</sup> Feminism exists for more than the personal sexual freedoms of the materially privileged.

Similar criticisms of the post-structuralist programme at large have reverberated amongst theorists of race and disability. Far from liberating those marginalised by multiplicity, Hames-Garcia writes, the response that all identity claims are equally imaginary, and the removal of any “epistemological ground on which one can claim one ‘belongs’”, merely “increases the sense of homelessness for members with opaque interests.”<sup>36</sup> The problem with dismantling identities, is that, however they are constituted (and Hames-Garcia agrees in principle that we cannot escape the social-subjective mediation of truth, and that identities are therefore never static entities),<sup>37</sup> identities have tangible material consequences, and we need ways of assessing between – albeit, ubiquitously subjective – claims.<sup>38</sup> Post-structuralism cannot inform us about what might constitute justifiable political action, because it cannot distinguish between the contingent, and the arbitrary.

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<sup>32</sup> Martha Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody,” *The New Republic* (Feb, 1999): 45.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Hames-Garcia, “Who Are Our Own People”, 120.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 116, 111.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

The same point is made by Tobin Siebers, whose article “Disability Experience on Trial” offers a poignant portrait of the predicament facing advocates for marginalised groups after post-structuralism’s radical undermining of objectivity. In 2004, a United States Supreme Court ruling (*Tennessee vs. Lane*) made it possible to sue states whose court-rooms and legal facilities were not accessible to people with disabilities. This was following an incident in which a plaintiff who required the use of a wheelchair had been left to crawl up a flight of stairs to his hearing, while court employees, including the judge, watched on in laughter. The bedrock of the case was the plaintiff’s experience, and the response of critics to the ruling, according to Siebers “defines the dominant theoretical position on experience in historical and cultural studies.”<sup>39</sup> Joan Scott wrote of the case that its appeals to “difference” and “identity” only served to naturalise and reproduce, rather than contest “given ideological systems”. There are no individuals who have experiences, merely individuals constituted by experience, she insisted.<sup>40</sup> “Apparently,” writes Siebers, summing up Scott’s position, “because it is socially constructed, individual experience may serve neither as origin of explanation nor as authoritative evidence about what is known.”<sup>41</sup>

Though these examples are drawn from race and disability studies, rather than gender politics, some parallels in terms of the predicament faced by feminism as a political movement are illuminating. The refusal to extrapolate patterns of discrimination from the experience of individuals to the collective experiences of a group can render movements blind to structural discrimination. At the close of this chapter it will be possible to demonstrate how events like the *Tennessee vs. Lane* ruling are providing ways for theorists such as Siebers and Rosemary Garland-Thompson to develop post-constructivist approaches to identity, with strong overlaps and much to contribute to feminists troubled by the apparent narcissism, individualism, and consequent gender-blindness of feminism in its post-structuralist mode.

However, it is first necessary to consider that, even at the edges of these more political objections to Butler’s work and the work of other constructivists, a number of substantive conceptual contentions are already implied. Butler’s concept of performativity, which sums up her proposition that acting and speaking not only represent

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<sup>39</sup> Tobin Siebers, “Disability Experience on Trial,” in *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Heckman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 292.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 293.

the world but actively constitute it, while not highly original, is “plausible and even interesting”, according to Nussbaum, but there are some stark theoretical gaps too: “If she means that babies enter the world completely inert, with no tendencies and no abilities, this is far less plausible, and difficult to support empirically.”<sup>42</sup> Here Nussbaum echoes perhaps the most widespread criticism of the linguistic turn. As Barad has put it, “Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters...the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter.”<sup>43</sup>

And with this maxim, we approach an interesting irony at the heart of a theory the purported aim of which was the deconstruction of binaries. One binary, it seems, has been left very much intact. “Far from deconstructing the dichotomies of language/reality or culture/nature,” Stacy Alaimo and Susan Heckman write, post-moderns “have rejected one side and embraced the other.”<sup>44</sup> In constructivism, if the existence of a material reality is believed at all, there remains a radical doubt as to its accessibility. We are therefore left with an epistemological reduction: if we cannot “know” something without simultaneously constructing it, then we are locked within a culture which writes itself over the material world. The material world remains a “blank sheet”,<sup>45</sup> passive and, as in modernism, awaiting inscription by the human will. Bruno Latour, referring to this as the staunch Cartesianism of postmodernity, concludes “We have not moved an inch”.<sup>46</sup>

The objection might be made at this point that Butler’s emphasis on performance and reification in the body do in fact constitute an emphasis on the material. In a sense both Foucault and Butler were supremely interested in the power of the material, which is presented as a force that outruns the control of the discourses through which it was structured. But performativity, however “bodily” in Butler’s scheme, is always harnessed to a linguistic principle. It is external discourses that initiate us into the parts we act, and in a sense, performances can only in fact be seen as “bodily” in retrospect. This is close to the point made by Claire Colebrook, whose reading of Butler contests Nussbaum’s accusation that for Butler nothing precedes language. “What is other than the act and

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<sup>42</sup> Nussbaum, “Professor of Parody”, 41.

<sup>43</sup> Karen Barad, “Post-humanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” in *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Heckman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 120.

<sup>44</sup> Alaimo and Heckman, “Introduction”, 2-3.

<sup>45</sup> Woodward, “Why Feminism Matters”, 142.

<sup>46</sup> Bruno Latour cited in Vicky Kirby, “Natural Convers(at)ions: Or, What if Culture Was Really Nature All Along,” in *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Heckman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 225.

desire of practice is affected through the relations of practice; matter is not a foundation that precedes relations but is always already given through those relations,” Colebrook writes, reminding us of Butler’s deep concern with the matter of recognition.<sup>47</sup> Butler is often seen as pessimistic about the scope for imaginative reorganisations of gender matrices because she believes that to be a “self” capable of subversive acts, we must have a recognisable bodily style. The conditions and limits of having a recognisable self for Butler are therefore material. But for Colebrook, Butler cannot transcend the language/reality dichotomy because she “allows matter to remain that which can only be posited after the event – as that which must have been ‘before’ the recognised performance of the self.”<sup>48</sup>

The criticism that post-structuralism reinforces a nature/culture binary, in reading post-structuralism against its own intentions, poses a serious challenge to its programme. But it is necessary in concluding this section to point out that not all critiques of Butler are equally helpful in moving feminism forward in the wake of a constructivist turn it can hardly ignore. Nussbaum’s highest complement to Butler is to acknowledge that her question about how deep culture might run is somewhat “interesting”, and this seems almost ungracious in its understatement of how unsettling the problem ought to be, regardless of how one assesses the work of different academics grappling with it. By Nussbaum’s own acknowledgement, in the history of feminism, this question has not ceased to be asked,<sup>49</sup> and feminists before Butler had been pushing the same limits by suggesting that “social forces go so deep that we should not suppose we have access to such a notion as ‘nature’.”<sup>50</sup> It is worth wondering if the dismantling of the sex/gender binary was not then an inevitable response to an already troubled orthodoxy. Nussbaum, in “Professor of Parody”, offers no theoretical alternative, save to gesture rather vaguely towards “some prediscursive desires – for food, for comfort, for cognitive mastery, for survival”,<sup>51</sup> and to call for more “subtle” studies of “the interplay of bodily difference and cultural construction.”<sup>52</sup> Moving on to critique Butler on the basis of her political prescriptions, this is where Nussbaum leaves it, and leaves us, the word “interplay”

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<sup>47</sup> Claire Colebrooke, “On Not Becoming Man: The Materialist Politics of Unactualized Potential,” in *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Heckman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 67-8.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>49</sup> Nussbaum, “Professor of Parody”, 40.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-2.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

betraying the assumption that we can simply return to exploring questions of gender at the intersection of two entities: the body, and culture.

It is possible to agree with Nussbaum's concerns but to remain unconvinced about her easy dismissal of Butler, just as it is possible to remain critical of Butler while conceding the benefits for feminism of radical attention to the generative operation of power through language. Many contemporary theorists find themselves inhabiting such a middle-ground. For these theorists, the question of access remains: if to "know" reality means simultaneously to construct it, can we know anything beyond culture? There is no direct route back from constructivism, nor would any simplistic return to a naïve realism be desirable, which is why there are persistent calls for a feminism which is able to take the insights of post-structuralism into account, while finding ways of treating the materiality of identity with due seriousness. Before introducing what have been labelled the "new materialist feminisms", which are characteristically an attempt to develop such a position, I will turn to discuss another aspect of the context which is making the emergence of these post-constructivist approaches urgently necessary.

## **ii) Shifting Scientific Frontiers and the Marginalisation of Feminism in the Sciences**

I, and others, started out wanting a strong tool for deconstructing the truth claims of hostile science by showing the radical historical specificity, and so contestability, of every layer of the onion of scientific and technological constructions, and we end up with a kind of epistemological electro-shock therapy, which, far from ushering us into the high stakes tables of the game of contesting public truths, lays us out on the table with self-induced multiple personality disorder.<sup>53</sup>

- Donna Haraway

If the cultural turn has served to disempower feminism as a political theory and movement, many feminists are now acknowledging that the feminist critique of science, which "definitively established the social construction of scientific knowledge", transforming the philosophy of science, has become "a victim of its own success."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Donna Haraway cited in Susan Heckman, *The Material of Knowledge: Feminist Disclosures* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), 65.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

Questioning all grounds of objectivity entails a loss of grounding in the “real”, and as Susan Heckman writes, science cannot afford to give up on the real.<sup>55</sup> The investment of feminism in epistemological critique, and the investment of science in continuing with traditional methods, has led only to the entrenchment of disciplinary divides, meaning that the material world, the environment, and non-human life are left “critically undertheorized within feminist scholarship”,<sup>56</sup> and feminist scientists find themselves straddling two fields which cannot comprehend each other.<sup>57</sup> Lynda Birke, a feminist biologist, sums up the schizophrenic nature of her cross-discipline career when she acknowledges, in an interview with Cecilia Asberg, her inner wrestle over whether to put the words “real” and “nature” into scare quotes when talking about her biological research to a feminist audience. “Descartes must be very happy with this,” she comments, “we live in an intellectual world where mind pretends body doesn’t exist”.<sup>58</sup>

The shifting frontiers of scientific knowledge and technology development make this disciplinary Cartesianism especially pernicious. The development of genetic modification technology for crops (where women are typically the hardest hit in times of famine), and the progress of new reproductive technologies, are two examples of scientific advancements which raise unprecedented moral questions that feminists must be ready to engage with.

At the same time, as Diana Coole and Samantha Frost point out, post-Newtonian physics continues to make matter strange in ways that should be of great interest to the social sciences: an acute challenge is currently posed to the presumption that agency in the construction of meaning can be attributed only to “social” life. While scientific lay people still tend to think in classical Cartesian or Newtonian terms about matter as the substance upon which forces act, physicists know that matter observed at a subatomic level exhibits nothing of the solidity we expect from observing the world in our everyday lives. Subatomic behavior consists of “constant emergence, attraction, repulsion, fluctuation, and shifting nodes of change.”<sup>59</sup> String theory, for example, describes “particles” as “more like vibrating strands of energy...than like the small versions of sand

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Asberg and Birke, “Biology Is a Feminist Issue”, 415.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 416.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 417.

<sup>59</sup> Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, edited by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 10-11.

grains suggested by their name.”<sup>60</sup> The natural sciences themselves are problematizing the notion of matter as static. We might more accurately describe it as “materialising” rather than “being”, or put otherwise, we might say “matter becomes” rather than “matter is”.<sup>61</sup> At such a time the need for new models for understanding the production of knowledge, developed out of, and fostering interdisciplinary engagements, seems evident.

### **iii) Fleshing out Critical Theory: The New Material Feminisms**

“[O]ver the past three decades or so theorists have radicalized the way they understand subjectivity,” write Coole and Frost, introducing their 2010 edited work, *New Materialisms*, “Yet it is on subjectivity that their gaze has focussed...it is now time to subject objectivity and material reality to a similarly radical reappraisal.”<sup>62</sup> This neatly summarises the shift of emphasis represented across diverse contributions to their collection, a shift they maintain is the hallmark of an emerging (if still heterodox) body of responses to the crisis of “identity” and the shifting of scientific frontiers explored above. These responses might best be seen as part of a research programme driven by the collective conviction that “matter matters”:<sup>63</sup> that, far from being the shapeless “stuff” on which the powers of language work, matter works a power of its own, possessing “its own modes of self-transformation, self-organisation, and directedness,”<sup>64</sup> and capable of constructing the “social” world as much as it is constructed by it. Post-structuralism and other constructivist critical theories must be fleshed out, made capable of accounting for the relationship of language to matter in ways that are not uni-directional. This can only be achieved if we see the material world as a foundation or starting point for, rather than as a threat to, critical theory.

For the purposes of this chapter, with its particular focus on the reframing of the culture/nature debate to meet the demands of an emancipatory politics, it is perhaps helpful to consider two levels at which the relationship between nature and culture is

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>63</sup> Driven also, it would seem from the literature, by enthusiasm over the endless potential for punning on the word “matter”, a temptation to which I am not immune. The suggestion that the *New Materialisms* might best be seen as a research programme was inspired by the structure of Coole’s and Frost’s collection, which holds together diverse voices from different fields of study, on the basis of their collective interest in bringing matter to the fore.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

being re-theorised. Iris Van der Tuin, whose review of a spread of current works on the new materialist turn provides a helpful overview of the literature implicated in this shift, commends the tri-part structure of the *New Materialisms* for accurately highlighting three central themes reflected across otherwise disparate new materialist work: the “current posthumanist theorisation of agential matter in the natural sciences and beyond”, the “theoretical impetus of biopolitics and bioethics”, and the “non-linear take on the political economy.”<sup>65</sup> Arguably, however, many theorists exploring new materialist approaches to biopolitics, bioethics, and the political economy, take inspiration from the work of feminists retheorising matter at the ontological level. A close exploration of the work of Karen Barad and Coole will allow us to trace some of the contours (and the flexibilities) of *new materialist ontologies*. A discussion of whether Coole’s phenomenological approach fits within the anti-representationalist focus of Barad’s work will be important to a discussion of the compatibility of the respective work of these theorists within a shared agenda. Then, in analysing the possible value of their contributions to feminist theory and political practice, the work of Siebers and Garland-Thomson will be used to show how effective critical theories can flow out of the conceptions of agency that Barad and Coole offer.

### **a) Replacing Representationalism: Karen Barad’s “Agential Realism” and the Productive Performances of Matter**

Barad’s ontological theory of “Agential Realism” begins with a reading of social constructivism as sharing problematic assumptions with what she calls the “representationalist” paradigm, an understanding of language which presents it as playing a mediating function between external reality and the monadic subject. To address the problems inherent in this paradigm, Barad interprets and extends the philosophical reflections on quantum theory of the physicist Niels Bohr. By reading Bohr’s theory of scientific apparatuses and Butler’s theory of performativity through each other, Barad attempts to decentre the humanist emphasis of Butler’s framework to arrive at a post-humanist account of agency. In this process, dichotomous models of discourse/matter and epistemology/ontology, the foundational binaries representationalism assumes, are

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<sup>65</sup> Iris van der Tuin, “Review essay: New feminist materialisms,” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 34 (2011): 275.

profoundly challenged. An exploration of Bohr's theory of complementarity, a description of its possible ontological thrust according to Barad, and a summary of how Butler's concept of performativity is extended by Barad through her Bohrian reading, will make the nature of this challenge clear.

Barad has already been cited in our discussion as contending that with every turn we make – “the linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn” – everything is “turned into a matter of language or some or other form of cultural representation” so that “the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter.”<sup>66</sup> Asking the question of what has led us to grant such substantialising power to language, and driven us to conclude that cultural representations are accessible when the things that they represent are not, Barad concludes that “the representationalist belief in the power of words to mirror pre-existing phenomena is the metaphysical substrate that supports social constructivist as well as traditional realist beliefs.”<sup>67</sup> Representationalism, as Barad uses the term here, derives its name from the political concept of representation within liberal social theories, which present the individual as an entity (with pre-existing capacities and attributes) prior to “the law or the discovery of the law – awaiting/inviting representation.”<sup>68</sup> We can now speak of “political, linguistic, and epistemological forms of representationalism”,<sup>69</sup> but Barad asserts that the foundational metaphysic underlying all forms is the belief that representations and what they represent are two entities which exist anterior to each other (the represented exists “independent of all practices of representing”).<sup>70</sup> When the picture is complicated with the addition of a “knower” (alongside “knowledge” as representation, and the “known” as that which is represented), representationalism is often expressed as the idea that language plays a “mediating function between independently existing entities.”<sup>71</sup> An atoms-in-the-void conception of existence is implied.

Various theories of social constructivism have attempted to bring the representationalist paradigm into dispute, in some ways we have already addressed. In the

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<sup>66</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity”, 120.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>69</sup> We will encounter and dialogue with a linguistic expression of representationalism in our third chapter, where we find Rowan Williams (in work which relies on Merleau-Ponty) trying to dismantle the understanding of words as objects used to mediate between a world of external objects and the “internal” subject.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

sphere of identity politics this has happened through successive assaults on the idea that the political subject as represented in emancipatory politics exists before their construction through discourse (that is, through the act of representation). Branching into critiques of the scientific method, constructivists have then postulated (on similar terms) that knowledge practices in the sciences construct the objects that are under observation. But critics such as Joseph Rouse have claimed that the “adversarial positions” of realism and constructivism “have more in common than their proponents acknowledge”, and Barad states, in agreement with Rouse, that these positions agree that knowledge practices mediate our access to the material world. The former simply believes that “Nature” is being accurately represented, so that representations correspond to the world as it really is, where the latter presents language as a corrupt or distorting medium, and has despaired of the possibility of unfettered access to what lies beyond our representations. Like Descartes, we now have an “asymmetrical faith in our access to representations over things”,<sup>72</sup> but our belief in a passive external material world awaiting representation remains.

If it is the “taken for granted ontological gap” between knower, known, and the knowledge practices which mediate between them, that “generates questions of the accuracy of representations”,<sup>73</sup> Barad believes we can get beyond the representationalist paradigm by taking up a metaphysic that is implicit in the work of Bohr. Bohr’s theory of the nature and role of scientific apparatuses and their relationship to the subjects and objects of scientific experiment developed in response to debates taking place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries about the nature of light. By the end of the nineteenth century, empirical evidence for the wave-like characteristics of light had replaced Newton’s corpuscular theory, which held that light exhibited the behaviour of particles. During the first quarter of the twentieth century, however, this consensus was troubled by new experiments which seemed to indicate that light exhibited wave-like characteristics under some conditions, and particle-like characteristics under others.<sup>74</sup> This “wave-particle” debate spilled over when it became clear that *matter* (electrons) exhibited the same wave-particle duality.<sup>75</sup> The classic “two-slit” experiment involves an apparatus which aims particles or waves at a partition with double slits. Passing through either of

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>74</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 97-100.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 100.

the slits, the particles or waves land on a screen, making a mark. The aggregate position of the marks is used for determining whether wave or particle behaviour is exhibited by the matter passing through the partition. Waves exhibit a diffraction pattern on the screen, marking their interference with each other as they spread, while particles land on parts of the screen directly opposite the slits. However, when a single electron is aimed at the partition, it passes through it to produce an interference (wave) pattern, and in the twentieth century this raised unprecedented questions for physics. Particles and waves have mutually exclusive characteristics, since particles are “localised”, occupying one area of space at a given time, where waves “have extension in space.”<sup>76</sup> Could a single electron be moving through both slits at once, or interfering with itself?

Bohr and Albert Einstein made use of theoretical modifications to the “two-slit” gedanken experiment to explore this and other quandaries, and their differing predictions for how particle-wave duality might be resolved are useful for understanding the crux of Bohr’s position. Bohr designed a modification to the two-slit apparatus that would theoretically determine which slit the electron moved through. The apparatus involved mounting the upper slit on a movable diaphragm, so that the transference of momentum from the atom to the partition could be recorded as the atom passed through the slits. Einstein argued that with such a device, it would be possible to see how electrons could simultaneously act as particles and waves.<sup>77</sup> Bohr argued to the contrary that using a “which-path” apparatus would destroy the interference pattern: electrons would display particle characteristics. That is, it would be impossible to see electrons behaving simultaneously as a wave and as a particle. If the measurement apparatus defined the electron as a particle, it would exhibit particle characteristics.<sup>78</sup> When it became possible to perform Bohr’s experiment, long after his death, this prediction was found to be correct: there is a fundamental trade-off between obtaining “which-path” information, and recording an interference pattern.<sup>79</sup>

Bohr’s prediction entailed the formulation of the principle of “complementarity”: that is, the circumstances under which matter exhibits particle characteristics, and those under which matter exhibits wave characteristics, are mutually exclusive

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 103-4.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 302-10.

(complementary).<sup>80</sup> The basis of this principle for Bohr was the concept of “indeterminacy”, which holds that it is impossible to collapse indeterminacy for one variable through measurement, without simultaneously excluding the possibility of determining the effects of measurement. It is therefore impossible to distinguish between the characteristics of the object being measured, and the agency of its measurement.

Barad offers the example of the measurements needed to determine “position” and “momentum” to illustrate this concept. Imagine that an experiment for measuring the position of a particle in the air required a flash camera mounted on a tripod in a dark room. A single photon of light could be bounced off the particle onto a photographic plate, and the camera could in this way record the position of the object. The photographic plate would need to be *fixed*, or else the position of the object would be indeterminate. However, contact with one photon would be enough to displace the particle under observation. Therefore, to determine the measurement-independent position of the particle we would need to establish the final momentum of the photon after it makes contact with the particle, and subtract from this value, the value of the initial momentum of the photon. To measure the final momentum of the photon would require that the photographic plate be *movable*, that is, capable of marking the impact of the photon’s momentum. The problem is, if the photographic plate is fixed, the photon is part of the agencies of observation (apparatus), where if the photographic plate is movable, the photon becomes part of the object of observation. The circumstances required for measuring momentum and position are therefore mutually exclusive, or, it is *physically impossible* to sharply determine both momentum and position at once: one or the other variable must remain indeterminate. The trade-off between “which-path” and interference information works along similar lines, since in the two-slit experiment the measurements for momentum (for example, with an arrangement like a movable diaphragm) and the measurements for position (with a fixed partition) are not simultaneously determinable.

A number of important implications of Bohr’s theory of complementarity are drawn out by Barad, and will be explored shortly, but helpful definition is added to her reading where she observes that the ontological significance of “indeterminacy” is often underplayed or ignored in both popular and scientific discourse, where it is conflated with

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 106.

or replaced by the more famous “uncertainty principle”.<sup>81</sup> At the same time as Bohr was exploring complementarity, Werner Heisenberg published a paper which considered the problem of a trade-off between accuracy of measurements for position and momentum (in a scenario very close to the particle-photon-photographic experiment just discussed). The paper, which introduced the “uncertainty principle”, focussed on the problem of disturbance when a photon hits an atom, the discontinuity of momentum.<sup>82</sup> However, Barad notes that on its own, this problem would not “exhaust the possibilities for determining the (alleged) pre-existing properties of the particle” unless it was also impossible “to determine the effect of the measurement interaction and subtract its effect.”<sup>83</sup> Bohr’s “indeterminacy principle” goes a step further than Heisenberg by suggesting that subtracting the effects of measurement interaction would be physically and *therefore logically* impossible because of the alternative physical arrangements needed to make the original measurement and to take measurement itself into account.

The difference between these positions, as Barad marks it, is that between stating an epistemological problem and staking an epistem-ontological position. For Heisenberg, uncertainty (as the name suggests) is an epistemic problem, and he retains the concept of a reality beyond measurement with inherent properties of position and momentum that could still, theoretically, be accessed. For Bohr, on the other hand, concepts such as “momentum” or “position” are not simply ideational, but are semantic-ontic, because concepts are fundamentally inseparable from the material arrangements which give these properties their sense. Bohr therefore wrote in his response to Heisenberg’s paper that “a sentence like ‘we cannot know both the momentum and position of an atomic object’ raises at once questions as to the physical reality of two such attributes of the object”.<sup>84</sup> If certainty about momentum and certainty about position require mutually exclusive material arrangements, we have no business positing a reality beyond our measurements, with measurement-independent properties of position and momentum. Properties before measurement are not just unknown, but ontologically indeterminate.<sup>85</sup> As Barad puts it,

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 115-6.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>84</sup> Niels Bohr cited by Barad. Ibid., 117.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 268.

“The issue is not one of unknowability per se; rather, it is a question of what can be said to simultaneously exist.”<sup>86</sup>

Thus while Barad is careful to admit that Bohr’s writing most often focusses on epistemological issues and never explicitly sets out an ontological landscape,<sup>87</sup> her reading suggests that Bohr’s position is actually a challenge to the distinction between epistemology and ontology itself. As we noted with the particle-photon-photographic experiment above, the varying material arrangements of experiments allow for various delineations (as Barad puts it, “constructed cuts”) between apparatus and object.<sup>88</sup> But the boundaries between entities are in such cases local, and materially enacted.<sup>89</sup> The idea of fixed or universal distinctions between the subjects and objects of experiment (as in Newtonian physics and in Cartesian ontology) is rejected by Bohr, and *phenomena*, comprised of agencies of observation and objects of observation, become the primary ontological units.<sup>90</sup> Because the effects of measurement cannot be discounted from the properties measured, these properties cannot be attributed to objects as if they were measurement-independent (as in Newtonian physics), but must be attributed to objects-within-phenomena. If these features of Bohr’s thought hint towards a non-dichotomous understanding of subject/object, the fact that “concepts” within his schema are not purely semantic but are embedded in material arrangements might be seen as a further challenge to the culture/nature or language/matter binaries. We do not stand above nature when we measure, we stand within it, and are part of its unfolding: our “knowing” participates in its materialisation.<sup>91</sup>

If some resonances between this position, and aspects of post-structuralism are becoming clear – remembering that for post-structuralism “knowing” always entails an act of construction – it is useful now to examine Barad’s use of Butler, in order to see how Barad’s distinctive position develops out of her agreements and divergences with Butler. While Barad remains critical of Butler on several fronts, she regards her theory of

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>87</sup> Barad, “Meeting the Universe Halfway”, in *Feminism, Science and the Philosophy of Science*, eds. Lynn Hankinson Nelson and Jack Nelson (Dordrecht, Boston and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), 174.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 176-7; Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 246. Barad finds these themes in Bohr but finds nevertheless a lingering humanism in his treatment of the human subjects of experiment, see Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 144.

performativity as a step in the right direction, saving Butler from the charge of linguistic monism that might be rightly applied to some forms of constructivism.<sup>92</sup> We have seen that Barad regards the postmodern problem of access (how we might have any access to nature from within the web of cultural signs we inhabit) as a sign only that with postmodernism representationalism has become “a prisoner of the problematic metaphysics it postulates.”<sup>93</sup> Performativity moves us some distance from this metaphysic because it relies on a concept of *discursive practices* (that is, it is rooted in acts rather than language, fitting somewhere in between the worlds of words and things),<sup>94</sup> and because it allows us to think of materialisation as a process wherein the boundaries between “subject” and “object” are seen in their historicity, as material “realities” enacted over time.<sup>95</sup> In these ways post-structuralism is not a denial of the real (the flesh of bodies), but only a challenging of the assumption that appeals to the “real” can be devoid of constitutive power. In its focus on the instantiation of bodily boundaries, performativity echoes the notion of exteriority-within-phenomena that Bohr uses to define the objects of experiment: different material arrangements enact different “cuts” within an experiment, and the results therefore refer to a reality within a given interaction (or “intra-action”, as Barad puts it, avoiding Cartesian connotations).<sup>96</sup> Both Butler and Bohr, in this way, could move us towards a non-dichotomous metaphysic where relations are ontologically prior to relata.

However, despite the promise of performativity, Butler fails to move entirely past the representationalist paradigm, because, following Foucault, she is cannot “tell us in what way the biological and the historical are “bound together” such that one is not consecutive to the other.”<sup>97</sup> In fact (as we have already seen highlighted by other critics), matter for Butler plays only a passive role in materialisation.<sup>98</sup> To allow a concept of performativity to truly redefine our ontological terrain, we must move past our humanist understanding of it, and start to understand the performative role of matter itself in materialisation.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Barad, “Getting Real: Technoscience Practices and the Materialization of Reality,” *Differences* 10:2 (1988): 91.

<sup>93</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity”, 122-130.

<sup>94</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 146-7.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>96</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity”, 133.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

Here a (broadened) Bohrian understanding of the role of apparatuses is useful. Where Butler cannot escape a humanist account of discursive practices because she deals only with the materialisation of human bodies, and therefore locates performativity in human acts, Bohr's understanding of apparatuses may offer us a way to transcend this paradigm.<sup>100</sup> Apparatuses are not just material products of human invention which sustain discursive practices,<sup>101</sup> but are inseparably and non-consecutively material-discursive, playing an active role both in meaning-making (producing "concepts"), and in the materialisation of non-human bodies.<sup>102</sup> That Bohr presents apparatuses as fixed and bounded entities used in a lab (and that the human subject stands somewhere behind Bohr's material arrangements as an independent observer),<sup>103</sup> should not prevent us from pushing his insights to new limits. This is especially given that Bohr's own logic somewhat undercuts a fixed conception of the apparatus. Barad notes that

In Bohr's account, one is not entitled to presume that an object has material properties in the absence of their specification through the larger material arrangement. The boundaries and properties of an "object" are determinate only within and as part of a particular phenomenon.<sup>104</sup>

If we were to consider the apparatus as itself an object of our observation, in other words, we would involve it in a wider phenomenon. In an example Bohr himself uses, when a man orients himself in the dark using a stick, if he holds the stick lightly, he may feel its contours as if it is an object, whereas if he holds it firmly, he can extend his bodily boundaries through it by using it to sense other objects. In a similar way, apparatuses themselves might be seen as specific material arrangements with shifting boundaries, forming part of phenomena that include, at times, the human subject.<sup>105</sup>

Taking this broader understanding of the apparatus, Barad argues that we may centre a new understanding of agency here: in the sense that apparatuses actively configure and reconfigure boundaries to produce new phenomena, we should read them performatively, that is, as practices that matter.<sup>106</sup> Thus Barad is able to arrive at her own

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<sup>100</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 145.

<sup>101</sup> As in Foucault, see *ibid.*, 147.

<sup>102</sup> Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity", 138-42.

<sup>103</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 153.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>105</sup> Bohr's example of the stick as an apparatus with shifting boundaries, see *ibid.*, 154.

<sup>106</sup> Barad actually writes that apparatuses should be understood as "discursive practices", but this terminology complicates her insistence on material-discursive inseparability I think, and since it is a post-

articulation of a new materialist ontology, “Agential Realism”, which she describes as a redefinition of both terms.<sup>107</sup> Through applying a theory of performativity to material-discursive arrangements rather than limiting this concept to human subjects, we find that what is real is not a world of human subjects and fixed material objects, but a world that is constantly worlding, through the performance of shifting intra-active relations with itself: as Barad puts it “matter is substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency.”<sup>108</sup> Humans are not simply situated somewhere within this world, rather we take part in its becoming, insofar as our knowledge practices are intra-active with the world, productive of new relationships.<sup>109</sup> Meaning is no longer seen as ontologically separate from matter, but knowledge practices are “part of the world making itself intelligible to another part.”<sup>110</sup> Agency is not an attribute of subjects or objects, but is a dynamism of performed relations.<sup>111</sup> Realism is not the belief in a world behind human knowledge, but a belief in the emerging world that knowledge practices participate in.

### **b) Diana Coole and “Being as Folded Flesh”: Redefining Agency with Merleau-Ponty**

Barad’s concern to redefine agency is shared by Coole, a feminist political theorist who takes up a reading of the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to derive an ontology which shares important features with Barad’s “Agential Realism”. Setting Coole and Barad together, the contours of a unified position might be posited, and given the diverse fields from which they approach their subjects, this unity is of some interest. However, flexibilities within this consensus must also be acknowledged, including the contentious issue of whether the phenomenological appeal for a return to the “lifeworld” betrays representationalist assumptions (about truth as a grounding in the “real”, that is, the world as it is prior to representation). The remaining part of this chapter will summarise Coole’s political theory, and assess some of its advantages over post-

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humanist account of performativity she looks for, I have stuck with the term “performativity” to describe practices that configure boundaries. See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 146-153, for her discussion of apparatuses as discursive practices.

<sup>107</sup> Barad, “Getting Real”, 89.

<sup>108</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 151.

<sup>109</sup> Barad, “Meeting the Universe Halfway”, 188.

<sup>110</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 185.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

structuralism. In making this case, it will be necessary to demonstrate how Merleau-Ponty (and consequently, Coole) pre-empt a number of potential post-structuralist criticisms. Affinities and divergences between Coole and Barad will then be explored, and the chapter will end by evaluating their positions together in terms the usefulness of their ontologies for political praxis.

Coole presents her reading of Merleau-Ponty as an attempt to recover agency for contemporary political thought, given that the problems of both modernism and post-structuralism are fundamentally related to how agency is conceived within these movements. The exclusive attribution of agency to the ontologically primary subject leaves liberalism with the problematic of how to “locate the glue that would hold society together”, while the postmodern critique of the subject, which renders both the individual and the collective “an unstable flux of shifting identities”, threatens to eliminate political agency altogether.<sup>112</sup> Merleau-Ponty is a useful ally in Coole’s endeavour, since, although he was primarily a critic of modernity, and a predecessor to post-structuralism whose work proponents of that paradigm rejected, he shares many post-structuralist concerns, while anticipating and consciously attempting to avoid the kinds of problems that critics frequently draw attention to in the work of Foucault and Butler.

Coole’s reading of Merleau-Ponty as primarily a political thinker is atypical, where his political writings are frequently treated as peripheral to his more central concern with returning to the lifeworld.<sup>113</sup> By demonstrating continuity between his rejection of both Marxism and liberalism, and his phenomenological writings, Coole develops a convincing case for seeing Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology as driven by a concern for the re-organisation of collective life. Liberalism and Marxism, for Merleau-Ponty, were two sides of the same rationalist coin at the heart of modernity,<sup>114</sup> where rationalism means a privileging of reason over other approaches to knowledge. This commitment occludes recognition of “forces that elude rational control, yet which are inseparable from the emergence of rationality”, among them contingency, ambiguity, and

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<sup>112</sup> Diana Coole, *Negativity and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 9.

<sup>113</sup> Diana Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics After Anti-Humanism*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 1. I will not be using Merleau-Ponty as a political theorist here, but I am following Coole in showing how an integrated approach to his work illuminates something about the post-humanist trajectory within his thought. This helps in understanding his ontology and what can be drawn from it, namely a new conception of agency.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

the elusive impact of embodied experience.<sup>115</sup> Rationalism is particularly pernicious in politics, for Merleau-Ponty, because it sustains systems that are increasingly self-assured and closed to lived experience.<sup>116</sup> Because of this closure, modern regimes find themselves thrown into crises they are unable to navigate, including conflicts between tradition and progress, freedom and authority, the individual and the collective.

At the heart of rationalism is a dualist ontology, which for Merleau-Ponty finds its archetypal expression in the legacy of Descartes. Descartes' successors carried forward an impoverished version of what was, in Merleau-Ponty's view, originally an inspired and living ontological reflection.<sup>117</sup> Merleau-Ponty, who (as we shall see) himself maintains a constant interest in the generativity of the negative,<sup>118</sup> prizes the tradition of doubt in Descartes, but criticises Descartes' attempt to establish certainty on the *cogito*, the price of which is a severance of mind and body where external verification becomes secondary to the certainty of consciousness.<sup>119</sup> Liberalism and Marxism tacitly assume this ontology, and in stressing alternative sides of the body-mind dichotomy (subjectivist and objectivist respectively), they face different pressures.<sup>120</sup> By universalising its principles, liberalism tears the free human subject from his/her material context. Liberal regimes are therefore prone to forgetting their own historicity, and to justifying their programmes of violence as they apply their abstractions to other contexts (without making recourse to concrete material strategies derived from their own experience). In line with his conviction that existential analysis of regimes within their material contexts is needed, Merleau-Ponty bases this conclusion on analyses of Western regimes and their relations with the colonies:<sup>121</sup> we have begun, he writes, "to defend liberty instead of free men."<sup>122</sup>

While this insistence on material conditions is reminiscent of Marxist analysis, Marxism fares scarcely better in Merleau-Ponty's assessment. While in his early career Merleau-Ponty expressed hopes for progress within post-revolutionary societies, based on the possibilities of dialectical reasoning for transformation within the flux of history, his later work observes with self-critical dismay that communist societies were exemplifying

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 26-8.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 24-5.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 31-2.

<sup>118</sup> Coole, *Negativity and Politics*, Chapter 4.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>121</sup> Coole, *Modern Politics*, 50-8. Coole maintains this could have been approached more carefully, and that Merleau-Ponty remained too dependent on 19<sup>th</sup> Century Marxist critiques, see 61.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 51.

only “the objectivist side of rationalism”.<sup>123</sup> Their excessive bureaucratisation, authoritarianism, the lost touch of governance with the masses, and the reestablishment of pre-revolutionary styles of privilege, were all manifestations of a naturalism pervasive in the thought of different Marxist exponents. Lenin’s and Trotsky’s respective materialisms conceived of history in deterministic terms, with man as an effect of nature,<sup>124</sup> and communist regimes followed suit in substituting triumphalist progress narratives for continued dialectical engagements,<sup>125</sup> rendering them ineffective in living up to their promises, while they became increasingly defensive and prone to violence. For Merleau-Ponty, these crude teleologies, and the reductive naturalism they depended on, reflected a correspondence theory of truth which set the subject somewhere outside the flux of history as an observer.<sup>126</sup> Liberalism and Marxism were suffering the same Cartesian ailment at their foundational level.

But Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of Marxism should not, Coole argues, be read as a rejection of dialectics per se.<sup>127</sup> The problem with Marxism was one of closure where revolution (negation), had become governance. Although Merleau-Ponty recognised that negativity (a deliberately elusive concept, but in Merleau-Ponty’s political writings a term that connotes reflexivity or generative self-critique, an openness to the unrepresentable which allows for the hazardous emergence of truth against the closure of stagnant ideology)<sup>128</sup> could not be “a force of governance” it still needed to be “accommodated within the structures of power”.<sup>129</sup> For Coole, the parallels Merleau-Ponty drew between Sartre (whose concept of negativity influenced Merleau-Ponty) and Marxism, get to the heart of the former’s conviction that Marxist dialectics had met a dead end. In *The Visible and Invisible* he writes “the dialectic is by principle an epithet, as soon as one takes it as a motto, speaks of it instead of practicing it, it becomes a power of being, an explicative

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 63-4.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 69

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>128</sup> Negativity is a concept to define, as Coole points out in her work on the subject, *Negativity and Politics*, because it “bears connotations of alterity, the non-rational and the unrepresentable” so that “to ask what it means is already to find oneself implicated in the questions and paradoxes it provokes.” Coole, *Negativity and Politics*, 1. The definition offered here is a working usage, where Merleau-Ponty criticises Marxist regimes for replacing the work of constant existential awareness for crass reifications, and it is furnished by Coole’s reading of Merleau-Ponty on truth and untruth, and the two meanings of ideology (Coole, *Modern Politics*, 47), which I will touch on at a later point in this discussion. Further texture will be added to this term in the discussion of ontology.

<sup>129</sup> Coole, *Modern Politics*, 79.

principle.”<sup>130</sup> Within Sartre’s voluntarism, human consciousness had been identified as pure negativity, where the subject, the pure reflexivity of the “for itself” stands over against the self-indifferent “in itself”, in acts of pure creation.<sup>131</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, once negativity has been spoken in this way, reified as a concept or identified with any particular agency, it “denatures”:<sup>132</sup> “from the moment I conceive of myself as a negativity and the world as a positivity, there is no longer any interaction.”<sup>133</sup> Within Marxist thought, the Proletariat had been granted *prima facie* ontological status of pure negativity, similar to Sartre’s subject, and this entailed a loss of contact with the ambiguities of history.<sup>134</sup> What was needed was a concept of negativity conceived within a different ontological framework, a dialectics rooted within an ontological space prior to the subject-object dichotomy.

It is Coole’s attention to the political works of Merleau-Ponty, and her insistence that his concern with the political crisis of modernity drove his subsequent ontological investigations,<sup>135</sup> that allows her to read his life’s work as a sustained attempt to move from subject-focussed (humanist) accounts of negativity, to anti-humanist accounts of a pervasive generativity of “the flesh”. Because this ontology emerged through a phenomenological approach, however, a brief excursus on some of the criticisms this approach has invited will highlight some key questions to consider as we investigate this trajectory in Merleau-Ponty’s thought. This will be important when we come to ask how he might escape post-structuralist dismissals, how he might avoid some of the criticisms levelled at post-structuralism itself, and how the position Coole develops out of his thought might be compatible with the thought of Barad.

For Merleau-Ponty, rationalism is not simply a collection of abstract ideas, but is founded in practical orientations to the world. It is an “ontological choice” marking a “distinctive style of existence”.<sup>136</sup> In a sense, Coole argues, such choices, the taking for granted of the horizons of a lifeworld where ideas or practices are accepted and incorporated into bodily habits, are inevitable in Merleau-Ponty’s schema.<sup>137</sup> They are, on

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<sup>130</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 93.

<sup>131</sup> Coole, *Modern Politics*, 77.

<sup>132</sup> Coole, *Negativity and Politics*, 128.

<sup>133</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 52.

<sup>134</sup> Coole, *Negativity and Politics*, 126.

<sup>135</sup> Coole, *Modern Politics*, 93.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

the other hand, also open to reassessment through a return to lived corporeal experience, and thus phenomenology, the return to the lifeworld (the world of phenomena, or “the things themselves”, before the emergence of distilled concepts such as the subject or object) remained central to his project of challenging modernity’s foundations.

On this description of phenomenology, the rejection of Merleau-Ponty’s work by Butler (following Foucault) may seem on first appearances to have precedent,<sup>138</sup> since the idea of a return to the “lifeworld” raises the spectre of recourse to a pre-discursive realm as a source for “truth”, anathema to post-structuralism.<sup>139</sup> Experience is, moreover, suspect in post-structuralist accounts, where the subject is considered a pure effect (recall Joan Scott’s maxim that there are no subjects who have experiences, but only subjects constituted by experience). After a description of Merleau-Ponty’s ontological reflections it will be possible to show that his work cannot easily be accused of invoking a representational theory of truth, or of making naïve recourse to subjective experience.

Merleau-Ponty’s early work in the *Phenomenology of Perception* is an attempt to replace the primacy of reason with the primacy of perception. Two concepts form the lynchpin of this project, the body, and intentionality. Before the emergence of the god’s-eye views of the world posited in science or rationalism, in fact before we can speak of consciousness at all, sense emerges in the world through corporeality, the body’s bent towards its surroundings as it seeks to incorporate what it perceives into its world. Perception is therefore a kind of between state, pre-conscious and yet not purely physiological. A number of examples helpfully elucidate this, but the primary one for Merleau-Ponty was the *gestalt*, the idea of a figure against a ground or field. When we put our attention onto an object (Merleau-Ponty uses the example of a house), we plunge into it, and all of the objects over which we have glanced become a horizon against which it stands out. Thus the things we perceive always have a field. Our view of the object is perspectival, so that we only see one side at a time, while other aspects are concealed. But this concealment “does not hamper my desire to see the object”, and the body, in seeking to understand its world, makes use of the horizon of objects which it has glanced over to focus on this one: it sees the house “according to the sides these other things turn toward

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<sup>138</sup> Coole looks at Butler’s critique in Chapter 7 of Coole, *Modern Politics*, esp. 205-6. Foucault’s similar rejection, 47.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

this object.”<sup>140</sup> The body in this way inhabits the objects it perceives, virtually situating itself within and around them. When an object becomes available to consciousness, it is the result of the body’s interrogation of the world, its taking up of the potential latent in the imbrication of object and horizon.

The body then, is not an object amongst the other objects in the world, a mechanism receiving signals and giving rise to consciousness, but is active in sense-making.<sup>141</sup> In the case of the phantom limb, Merleau-Ponty writes, neither psychical nor physiological causes can be posited, rather these aspects “gear into each other”.<sup>142</sup> Physiological conditions must be present, because the phantom disappears with the removal of the sensory conductors. Yet the limb also shrinks with the patient’s acceptance of his mutilation, so psychological causes are therefore implicated. Our options then, in understanding this phenomenon, are to posit a mix of these subjective and objective causes (which would require that we “discover the means of joining the one with the other”), or to integrate these causes “into a milieu they would share.”<sup>143</sup> Merleau-Ponty opts for the latter. To understand the phantom limb, we must understand that when a being exists, it has a world, and that this having is not “an objective consciousness”,<sup>144</sup> but a kind of style, a zone of possible operations that the body has established through being over time. The body is like an open situation, extending itself into its environment.<sup>145</sup> In the loss of a limb, we are confronted by the facticity of this pre-conscious horizon of existence. If the patient extends a phantom limb to walk, it is because

like the normal subject, he has no need for a clear and articulated perception of his body in order to begin moving. It is enough that his body is “available” as an indivisible power and that the phantom leg is sensed as vaguely implicated in it. Consciousness of the phantom limb itself therefore remains equivocal...He has not lost his leg because he continues to allow for it...<sup>146</sup>

Phantom limbs, in other words, show us something about a milieu which “exceeds the alternative” between objective and subjective causes.<sup>147</sup> They do not “occur at the level ofthetic consciousness” (they are not present because the patient “thinks” they are

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<sup>140</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 70-1.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-9.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

present),<sup>148</sup> nor are they a “sum of reflexes” (since the presence of the limb is independent of stimuli),<sup>149</sup> they occur in the space in-between consciousness and the world, a space in which the body aims at the world.

Some themes thus begin to emerge in the early work of Merleau-Ponty which will be of central interest. The first is that subject and object are being reconfigured in his work as historical or emergent phenomena, entities that are not just stable items “whose isolated parts are measured quantitatively and linked causally”.<sup>150</sup> Subject and object emerge out of a set of processes, and in Merleau-Ponty’s characterisation of these processes, a number of dichotomies are being broken down. We have touched upon the most obvious: the refusal of the active mind and passive body dualism, where the body is shown to be, as Coole puts it, “an emergent phenomenon, a formative existential process rather than an inert collection of biological organs (or a discursive fabrication).”<sup>151</sup> In the *gestalt*, sense emerges not through a presentation of stimuli to an individual brain, but the body must actively cooperate with its environment to bring objects into visibility.<sup>152</sup> And not just the human body, but other bodies are involved in sense-making. Again as illustrated by the figure and field,<sup>153</sup> there is a sense in which the body’s interrogation of its world is answered by the world’s unveiling of itself through inter-corporeality (remembering that the concealed faces of an object are present to us because the horizons of other bodies are implied in our horizon). For Coole, this kind of inter-corporeal reciprocity implies potential for a thick theory of inter-subjectivity, where, before the emergence of the cogito (or, we might add, of the three-dimensional object) a field of interacting bodies exists.<sup>154</sup> Second, there is the distinction between matter and meaning or knowing and being. Sense emerges out of the body’s participation in the flesh of the world, where in examples like the figure and field, the body “reaches the world” through acts of “mimesis”.<sup>155</sup> For Merleau-Ponty “the look” entails a kind of reciprocity that blurs the distinction between knower and known. The seer envelops visible things “As though it were in a relation of pre-established harmony with them, as though it knew them before

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>150</sup> Coole, *Modern Politics*, 166.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 166-7.

<sup>153</sup> The *gestalt*, for Merleau-Ponty was the “archetype of the originating encounter”, and he comes back to it repeatedly throughout his work. See *ibid.*, 165.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 43.

knowing them...so that finally one cannot say if it is the look or if it is the things that command.”<sup>156</sup> Apprehension comes through “coexistence”,<sup>157</sup> so that Coole can conclude that “knowing and being” within Merleau-Ponty’s thought “are not distinct”.<sup>158</sup> Finally, there is the distinction between the visible and the invisible, positivity and negativity.<sup>159</sup> In the *gestalt*, sense emerges through an interplay of figure, horizon, and body, but also crucially, the spaces in between. The concealed dimensions of a figure, the pronounced absences of its “invisible” aspects, provoke our interrogation of the visual field and are therefore “necessary for anything to appear at all”:<sup>160</sup> prior to the emergence of both subjects and objects is a landscape pocketed with latent possibility, precarious generative potential. As Coole puts it, in the *gestalt* Merleau-Ponty “recognizes a productive difference whereby invisible lines of force”, or things and the spaces between things, “structure and produce forms that are materially meaningful for the body”.<sup>161</sup>

But if these themes can be said to have been present in his earlier work, Merleau-Ponty still felt that the *Phenomenology of Perception* had retained a Cartesian framework of consciousness (albeit a tacit, silent cogito) versus the object.<sup>162</sup> Contrary to readings which view his last reflections as a radical break with his phenomenological thought, Coole describes his entire body of writing as “coiling over itself”, his later thought is a self-critical re-exploration that pushes his work from existential into ontological territory.<sup>163</sup> This metaphor is apt, since in *The Visible and Invisible* a kind of reversal takes place. In order to rid his work of subjectivism, consciousness had to be shown to be an expression of the self-reflexive nature of Being itself. While Merleau-Ponty had already begun to force a concept of agency beyond humanism in attributing intentionality to bodies (including animal bodies),<sup>164</sup> it is here that his anti-humanist immanentism becomes marked.

One way to map this reversal, Merleau-Ponty’s “own fold”,<sup>165</sup> is through the extension of his metaphor of “reversibility” (one conceptualisation of human self-

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<sup>156</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 133.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>159</sup> Coole, *Modern Politics*, 166.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>162</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 200; Coole, *Modern Politics*, 181-188.

<sup>163</sup> Coole, *Modern Politics*, 185-6.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

awareness) to Being, which culminates in the image of Being as “folded flesh”. Though the language of *The Visible and Invisible* is experimental,<sup>166</sup> many of the phrases he uses to grasp at the nature of Being (folds, flesh, intertwining, chiasm, reversibility, interiority and exteriority) unfold from the image of two hands touching. This is evoked in response to the lack of exteriority afforded the Cartesian cogito. If the human subject is severed from the objective realm, how can anything pass between myself and the object, as, for example, when “I give to my hands, in particular that degree, that rate, and that direction of movement that are capable of making me feel the textures of sleek and rough”?<sup>167</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s answer is that, between “the exploration and what it will teach me, there must exist some kinship” which provides me with an “opening upon a tactile world.”<sup>168</sup> The body must be able both to touch, and to be touched, which is precisely what it does: when my right hand holds on to an object, and my left hand touches my right, the “touching subject” is able to pass “over to the rank of the touched”,<sup>169</sup> and I experience myself as both subject and object, a body of the mind and a mind of the body.<sup>170</sup>

Crucially, these things are never experienced simultaneously. The two hands alternate between touched and touching, so that “I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realisation”.<sup>171</sup> These experiences “never exactly overlap” precisely because they “are part of the same body”.<sup>172</sup> There is a shift from one to another, not as something leaps across a breach, but as movement spreads across a hinge. The body folds back on itself, becomes strange to itself, as obverse and reverse,<sup>173</sup> and in this hiatus produced by non-coincidence, this opening in a fold, the generativity of the negative is at work. The shift, as Coole puts it “opens my body in two”,<sup>174</sup> so that “tangible it descends among [things], as touching it dominates them all.”<sup>175</sup>

Exploring the corollary of the two hands touching in the visual field will connect this sense of negativity as emergence “between folds” with Merleau-Ponty’s early concepts of intentionality and interrogation. The separation of vision and touch into

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>167</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 133.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>174</sup> Coole, *Modern Politics*, 174.

<sup>175</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 146.

separate senses is at any rate artificial for Merleau-Ponty, since “every movement of my eyes – even more, every displacement of my body - has its place in the same visible universe that I itemise and explore with them, as conversely, every vision takes place somewhere in tactile space.”<sup>176</sup> What Merleau-Ponty says about touch, he therefore also says of vision: that “he who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at”.<sup>177</sup> We have seen that when I encounter an object of perception, with some aspects facing me and with other aspects which are concealed from my sight, my body is drawn in and around that object, and I view its concealed aspects from the vantage points of other objects which share its horizon. I see what is concealed of that object via the faces that other objects turn towards it. There is then a sense in which, in the act of interrogation (in which my body crosses the distance between myself and the object) I install myself “in the midst of the visible” and experience myself as seen.<sup>178</sup> We might conclude that in order to see, I have to sense myself as an object of vision while I am also the subject of vision. My body is in a sense ruptured and folded over itself through such an act, it both “detaches itself upon” the world and also “detaches itself from” it in the act of seeing.<sup>179</sup> The fold or rupture is generative: the distance between the things seen and the seer is “deeply consonant” with their proximity, “constitutive for the thing of its visibility and as for the seer of his corporeity”, not “an obstacle between them” but “their means of communication.”<sup>180</sup>

To speak of the emergence of the subject in terms of a folding over or a hinging of the body is to move from the idea of subject and object as two distinct substances to an idea of a single substance or flesh, gaining distance from itself and so becoming self-aware. From here it is not a great leap to begin to talk of a monistic or immanentist ontology, in which subjectivity belongs to the self-reflexivity of one entity, what Merleau-Ponty refers to as Being itself. As Coole writes, once we have begun to talk of knowing and being as synonymous, of knowledge as a kind of participation, and once we have found that this participation is possible because the body and what it interacts with share an “affinity” or “continuity”, it becomes wrong to see the body’s relation to what it perceives “as solely an epistemological relationship.”<sup>181</sup> In his writings on perception,

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>181</sup> Coole, *Modern Politics*, 172.

Merleau-Ponty discusses the concealed aspects of an object as literally “invisible”, but throughout his later work we find him talking of the “invisible” as the potentiality latent in what is hidden,<sup>182</sup> which is a potentiality for the kind of rupture that makes possible the “relation of the visible with itself that traverses me and constitutes me as a seer”.<sup>183</sup> The seeing subject here is presented as a situation through which a more universal principle is at work. Coole writes that in the “noncoincidence of the touching-touched” Merleau-Ponty “discovers the upsurge of a more general flesh... ‘my body does not perceive’ so much as ‘perception dawns through it’.”<sup>184</sup> Slowly the metaphor of reversibility, the capacity of the body to double over itself to produce self-knowledge, is generalised to become a description of the flesh of Being itself. And negativity, importantly, is generalised beyond the subject in the same breath. If it is associated with the lacuna between the halves of the body as it doubles over itself, and with the generative absences which surround visibles and invite or instigate the body’s doubling, negativity, the possibility of contingency which is the necessary condition for novelty or becoming, is not a property of any one entity. It belongs in the intertwining of things and the spaces between things, the folds in the flesh of Being.

How might this philosophy of the in-between – which explores the inextricability of body and mind, matter and meaning, visible and invisible, which shifts the emergence of sense from the cogito onto the body and into the world of inter-corporeal existence, and which finally ends in an ontology of Being as existence doubling back on itself so that new possibilities arise between its folds – be of use for feminism in the wake of the post-structuralist critique? While Coole’s reflections on this problem come via her exploration of negativity within Merleau-Ponty, she frames her response to this question in terms of “agency”.<sup>185</sup> While the move of shifting agency (the capacity to “actively compose” the environment)<sup>186</sup> from the cogito and onto the body goes some way towards decentering the human subject, there was still a “danger here” that “dualism would simply reappear at one remove, with agentic bodies imposing their visceral intentions on an inert world”.<sup>187</sup> In other words, a distinction could remain between the inorganic and organic. Because of his generalisation of reflexivity and negativity to Being, this danger is averted

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>183</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 140.

<sup>184</sup> Coole, *Modern Politics*, 174.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 179.

by Merleau-Ponty, but not at the price of a kind of spiritualisation of inert matter, and the body retains a kind of reversibility that is exceptional.<sup>188</sup> He writes for example that

When we speak of the flesh of the visible, we do not mean to do anthropology, to describe a world covered over with all our own projections, leaving aside what it can be under a human mask. Rather we mean that carnal being, as a being of depths, of several leaves or several faces, a being in latency, and a presentation of a certain absence, is a prototype for Being, of which the body, the sensible sentient, is a very remarkable variant, but whose constitutive paradox already lies in every visible.<sup>189</sup>

In other words, the body's reversibility is distinctive or exceptional, but not ontologically so. The body is made of the same stuff as the inorganic, which is precisely why it can "interact with things" being "familiar with their existential styles".<sup>190</sup> And in the kinds of *gestalt* interactions we have considered, we find even inert objects to be "intrinsically relational, in process" enjoying a "potentiality beyond their actual visibility" because they are "subtended by a plethora of invisible relationships."<sup>191</sup> There is a sense in which, in interacting with bodies, even inert objects exhibit a kind of agency. Agency then, in Merleau-Ponty, is about a dynamism of interaction between emergent entities, more than (prima facie) a property of any one kind of agent.<sup>192</sup>

Here then, we find the bones of the political theory that Coole constructs from this phenomenological source. Agentic capacities

are now investigated in their own right, without presupposing in advance who or what will bear them. The phenomenological task is then to discern their ambiguous emergence within and across lifeworlds as singular or collective, acknowledging that they might achieve more or less cohesion or efficacy according to the situation, and that they can appear within prepersonal, personal, and transpersonal registers of existence.<sup>193</sup>

Bodies, and material as well as discursive structures will need to be recognised as politically meaningful, where these aspects have been neglected.

Separating agentic and subjective capacities could afford certain advantages over post-structuralist approaches to these themes, given criticisms of Butler draw attention to

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 136.

<sup>190</sup> Coole, *Modern Politics*, 179.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

the narcissism and political debilitation her work has arguably produced. Merleau-Ponty moves us past humanism, but, Coole reminds us “from our own perspective several decades later, an ontology of collective life after anti-humanism is surely needed, too.”<sup>194</sup> Butler and Foucault dismantled the subject in such a way as to fall into a very modern trap. Because modernity associated agency so closely with “rational agents whose freedom and responsibility are related intimately to their interiority”, external causes are always viewed by modernity as antithetical to freedom.<sup>195</sup> When against this background the interiority of the subject is dismantled, agency is likewise shattered.<sup>196</sup> Critics of Foucault have accused him of championing a deterministic account of the subject as a product of subjection, while he reintroduces an unrealistically voluntarist and individualist account of agency.<sup>197</sup> Our reading of Butler suggested a similar dilemma pervades her thought: the subject being a product of the paternal law, the best hope for an emancipatory politics is in subversive acts, which only reveal the unreality and instability of supposed agents. There is no normative or collective vision for what happens from here on. With Coole’s reading of Merleau-Ponty, the modern subject is deconstructed, but since agency (in many of its traditional senses, of “potency”, “motivation” and creative “freedom”)<sup>198</sup> transcends the subject, there is still potential for a meaningful “politics”, with the sense of normativity and collective life that this word conveys.

A residual interest in language as a particularly significant locus for reflexivity remains for Coole, as it did for Merleau-Ponty,<sup>199</sup> and this ensures that the potency of discursive practices can be given its critical due. However, the agentic capacities of bodies and of the inorganic are not eclipsed. Post-structuralism’s weaknesses, in Coole’s view, are similar to the weaknesses that Merleau-Ponty saw in idealism, in that our engagement with experience is surrendered in favour of a one dimensional discursive emphasis.<sup>200</sup>

A preference for Merleau-Ponty’s ontological approach will nevertheless depend upon whether or not his work avoids the criticism levied at him by his post-structuralists

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>195</sup> Coole, “Rethinking Agency: A Phenomenological Approach to Embodiment and Agentic Capacities,” *Political Studies*, 53 (2005): 126.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 104.

successors, and while his attempts to avoid naïve subjectivism when he evokes experience do not need further rehearsal (given we have presented his work as a sustained effort to show how both subject and object emerge as bounded entities), we must return briefly to the question of whether Merleau-Ponty was evoking a representationalist theory of “truth” in returning to the “lifeworld”. Coole provides some clarification here, where she makes a distinction between the terms “ground” and “foundation”. Both “architectural metaphors” these terms suggest “the foundations of a building that supports its higher levels by anchoring them on solid ground.”<sup>201</sup> While Merleau-Ponty’s political philosophy is “grounded in corporeal existence”, she contends, this is “not foundational either in the sense that it allows the philosopher simply to deduce concepts from some natural origin or that it presupposes a stable bedrock for Truth.”<sup>202</sup> This reading seems accurate when set against Merleau-Ponty’s constant refusal of “high altitude thinking”, and his unswerving demand for a *constant* return to the things themselves. While our position as caught in the flux of reality demands that we be able to step momentarily out of the flow, distilling concepts “in order to conquer facticity”,<sup>203</sup> for Merleau-Ponty the most “important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction” since “we are in and toward the world, and since even our reflections take place in the temporal flow that they are attempting to capture.”<sup>204</sup>

“Truth” for Merleau-Ponty seems in this way more like a disposition than a transcendental reality, or as Coole writes it is “existential” rather than “epistemological”.<sup>205</sup> This is reflected in his political theory, where rather than mapping a concept of truth and falsehood along a distinction between reality and appearance, Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Marxism concerns “the fecundity or the sterility of actors’ engagement with the world and with one another.”<sup>206</sup> Falsehood is less a misrepresentation of a prior foundational realm than a lack of openness to a future, a refusal to recognise the fluidity and contingency of the world’s becoming, and to see oneself as part of that contingency. There is no pretence here of getting behind the imbrication of knowledge and materiality to arrive at a pure “nature”. Where matter and meaning are ineluctably interwoven, no philosophy can transparently mediate the

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Ixxviii.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Coole, *Modern Politics*, 47.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

meaning of matter.<sup>207</sup> And if Merleau-Ponty escapes a rationalist expression of representationalism because of this recognition, it also prevents him from what Barad considers to be representationalism's constructivist manifestation, the world locked within the opacity of words. A comparison and demonstration of the affinity between the ontological position Coole draws from Merleau-Ponty and the work of Barad (whose aversion to the representational theory of truth, via Bohr, has already been catalogued), will buttress this reading.

#### **iv) New Materialist Ontologies: An Emerging Consensus?**

While commentators on the New Materialism refer routinely to a lack of orthodoxy across the movement, placing thinkers like Barad and Coole side by side also reveals a high degree of consensus, some features of which will now be outlined.

Both Barad and Coole share a post-structuralist concern to challenge dichotomous conceptions of culture/nature, and for both this is achieved by focussing on the material aspects of meaning-making. Barad's concentration on scientific apparatuses and her Bohrian conception of scientific concepts as irreducibly semantic-ontic is matched by Coole's focus on the phenomenal body and the synonymy of knowing and being at the level of perception.

This ontological monism, however, is for neither theorist a denial of the experiential plausibility of the bounded subject or the observed object. Interestingly, Bohr's example of a man holding a stick in a dark room, whose differentially exerted pressure on the apparatus constructs two different "cuts" between subject and object, is almost identical to a description of a blind man holding a cane, which Merleau-Ponty uses to demonstrate the body's extension of itself into space through incorporating a new apparatus into its limits.<sup>208</sup> For Coole, following Merleau-Ponty, the body is an open situation, and this is another way of saying it has shifting boundaries. Likewise the object emerges for Coole as a result of processes through which boundaries are configured.

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<sup>207</sup> While we have simply followed Coole's reasoning here, to this summary we would add that Merleau-Ponty's theory of language is clearly a dialogue aimed against linguistic representationalism and the idea that words are objects depicting other objects to evoke internal representations for the subject. But this is a theme that we will return to in more depth in Chapter 3, because Merleau-Ponty heavily influences Williams's anti-representationalist account of language.

<sup>208</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 144.

Something similar to Barad's idea of local "cuts" within phenomena also resonates with Merleau-Ponty's two hands touching, where the body shifts from subject to object. While neither the bounded subject nor the bounded object are attributed ontological status for Barad or Coole, and while the world as they describe it is one of intrinsic fluidity, there is a deep concern to understand the practices through which our lived distinctions emerge. Barad and Coole might, in this way, be considered genealogists.

In fact, where boundary-making practices are characterised quite negatively within some traditions of feminist thought – in particular the psychoanalytic tradition, in which boundaries are imposed by the paternal law – Barad and Coole present the performance of "cuts" (or for Coole, the lived horizon of a lifeworld) as both inevitable and productive. This is conveyed in Coole's reading of Merleau-Ponty on the flesh's generative negativity, where the "fold" is an occasion for nature's own immanent self-disclosure. It is echoed in Barad's celebration of the possibility of a kind of "objectivity" or scientific realism, provided that this is understood as provisional. A sense of nature's immanent self-disclosure might be posited with Barad too, since we cannot "know" anything except as reality within "phenomena", and we cannot "know" phenomena except from within. What is unproductive is a reification of boundaries, either in Merleau-Ponty's sense of stultified ideology, or in Barad's sense of representationalism. Both situations lead to a loss of critical reflectiveness, where our embeddedness within an emerging reality is ignored, and either the productive force of our knowledge practices or their materiality is underappreciated.

With this sense of "immanence" – the subject's immersion within material existence – playing such a central role, these new materialist ontologies might also be jointly considered as philosophies of human limitation. In saying this, if there is a point on which Barad and Coole could be contrasted, it might be the degree to which their theories could be considered antihumanist. Here Barad's focus on apparatuses might prove more disruptive to humanist assumptions than a phenomenological approach (since apparatuses are more obviously composed of "inert" matter than are bodies), and it is worth considering that from Coole's perspective the retention of some kind of privileging of human reflexivity is not unwelcome. As a political theorist, Coole considers the recovery of normativity to be essential for communal existence. But if there is an insoluble difference between Barad and Coole on this front, its significance should not be overemphasised (and when in our final chapter we come to demonstrate how Williams's

theology of language bears certain resemblances to the project Barad and Coole are engaged in, we may find that this particular point of flexibility within the new materialisms is of some advantage). There is a world of difference between an uncritical classical humanism, and a reconstructed humanism in full awareness of its own contingency, and both Barad and Coole have taken the same leap in challenging the *prima facie* attribution of agency to only human subjects. Agentic capacities, rather than agents, remain their focus, and these capacities have at least the potential to emerge across shifting relations between the organic and the inorganic.

Finally, and though we have touched on aspects of nature's generativity, the extent to which these ontologies present nature as an open system, as a "becoming" rather than a "being", deserves emphasis. For Coole's Merleau-Ponty, triumphalist teleologies were the cardinal sin of Marxist regimes, ironically because they meant closure to the future. Marxists had failed to understand the open-ended productiveness of nature, and were unready for the appearance of new forms. For Barad, advancing technological practices are productive of new material-discursive realities, as when 3D ultrasound brings forth new ways of imaging life in the womb, and these images intra-act in the materialisation of new legislative apparatuses in the state.<sup>209</sup> Nature is bursting with possibilities for transformation, and our knowledge practices are one expression of this potential.

To what use might these ontologies of immanence, fluidity, contingency, and emergence be put? This chapter began with the crisis of feminism in postmodernity, and it is fitting that an analysis of Barad and Coole should end with an assessment of their usefulness for political praxis. An interesting point of departure for this will be to return to the work of Siebers, whose analysis of the *Tennessee vs. Lane* case (discussed earlier) demonstrates how a critical realist approach to identity, which shifts focus from "discourse" and onto bodies, material structures, and their interaction, might move us beyond the constructivist predilection for undermining experience. While resonances between Barad, Coole, and Siebers are deducible, Siebers does not explicitly couch his approach within an ontological framework. Garland-Thomson's concept of "misfitting" is therefore offered as a bridging example, which clarifies the links between new materialist ontologies and new materialisms in practice.

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<sup>209</sup> Barad, "Getting Real", 119.

What we witnessed in the Polk County Courthouse trial and its aftermath, Siebers argues, was a conservative court making radical decisions based on experience, and a self-proclaimed “radical” (Joan Scott) favouring absolute critique even where it undermined structural reform. Ironically, Siebers points out, both agreed that the plaintiff’s negative experiences were the result of social construction. The discrimination he experienced was on the basis of social perception rather than “the biological inferiority of disabled people.”<sup>210</sup> However, the court’s finding, that the *built* environment had been constructed “in the wrong way for disabled bodies and minds”, showed its willingness to treat the material consequences of socially constructed identities as significant. The blueprint of the Polk County Courthouse was evidence of the privileging of certain bodies in a certain space, and on the basis of similarities across other buildings, one could “rightfully conclude that prejudices against disabled people are at work in the architecture of society itself.”<sup>211</sup> This approach, Siebers argues, is a way forward after the excesses of the cultural turn. Disability “provides a vivid illustration that experience is socially constructed,” and simultaneously demonstrates “that the identities created by experience also contribute to a representational system whose examination may result in verifiable knowledge claims about our society.”<sup>212</sup> Knowledge claims, then, can be *formulated* on the basis of a deconstruction: a reversal of the post-structuralist claim. But this deconstruction must be centred, not on the language by which experiences are described, but on the assessment of identity claims against the interaction of bodies within space: “When a disabled body enters any construction, social or physical, a deconstruction occurs.”<sup>213</sup>

In her article “Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disabilities Concept”, Garland-Thomson develops this theme.<sup>214</sup> Here she takes up the concept of “misfitting” as a new description of disability, arguing that clashes of bodies and space (of the kind we have examined in the Polk County Courtroom example) can show us both the *reality* and *temporality* of identities. Fitting and misfitting, she writes, refer to encounters “in which two things come together in either harmony or disjunction.”<sup>215</sup> To see marginalisation as

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<sup>210</sup> Siebers, “Disability Experience on Trial”, 294.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>214</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept,” *Hypatia*, 26:3 (Summer 2011): 592.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

“misfitting” is to see that a problem “inheres not in either of the two things but in their juxtaposition”.<sup>216</sup> The juxtaposition of certain bodies in certain spaces makes identities (such as “disabled” or “female”) materialise, indeed, the “relational reciprocity between body and world materialises *both*, demanding in the process an attentiveness to the distinctive, dynamic thingness of each as they come together in time and space.”<sup>217</sup> As with Siebers, in Garland-Thomson’s scheme the post-structuralist deconstruction is in a sense turned on its head, so that the instability of identity can be seen in empowering terms. Structural clashes can illuminate the very means for societal and structural change.

Some strong resonances between Garland-Thomson’s critical praxis, and the features of the ontological frameworks of Barad and Coole can be listed as follows.<sup>218</sup> While Garland-Thomson relies on a conception of identity as performed (qua Butler), she also follows Barad in pushing performativity into the material world, recognising that the performance of dynamic *relations* has constitutive force (rather than just the discursive performances of individuals). While the reification of static boundaries within social life is analysed (the ways in which prejudices are built into architecture are carefully observed), at the ontological level boundaries are considered fluid, contingent, and immanent, constructed within temporary material-discursive arrangements (or “phenomena”).<sup>219</sup> The physical placement of a light-switch on a wall, the social assumptions which led to its installation at a certain height, the bodily style of a person in a wheelchair as they reach for the light, are collectively productive of that person’s identity as misfitting within a given spatial scenario. The potential latent in the critical distance between self-reflexive bodies and their objects (or, the capacity to experience material encounters as a subjective body and to reflect on them), provides room for the emergence of new forms of lived existence.

It has become commonplace within literature on third wave feminism to suggest that the influence of social constructivism or the post-structuralist critique has stripped the movement of some of its power: both its power for collective action and its ability to recognise and address structural discrimination. Many theorists writing from within feminism, with a sympathetic ear to the kinds of concerns that post-structuralism has drawn attention to around how concepts like identity emerge, agree that despite its

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 593.

<sup>217</sup> Emphasis added. Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Garland-Thomson highlights her debt to Barad, see *ibid.*, 592.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

intentions to deconstruct a problematic modern binary, constructivism has only served to reinforce the idea of culture as an active principle and matter as passive and awaiting inscription. An asymmetrical trust in our representations over what they represent may have led to a disciplinary Cartesianism, with the natural sciences and the social sciences talking past each other. In such a climate, finding a way to deconstruct the culture/nature binary in ways that do not obscure a sense of the agency of matter has become a central agenda for the “new materialist” theorists. Barad’s “Agential Realism” and Coole’s interpretation of Merleau-Ponty are two approaches which attempt to dismantle the Cartesian ontology underpinning the culture/nature divide. By highlighting the active participation of bodies or material arrangements within sense-making and boundary-making practices, these theorists attempt to show how the world as we know it is a vital and fluid material whole. Subjects and objects emerge as part of (and take part in) that world’s continual process of “becoming”. By shifting agency from the human subject and onto material bodies and their interaction, new and constructive ways of viewing the processes by which identities form are unfolding out of these ontologies. These provide a promising means for assessing and addressing the origins and effects of structural discrimination within emancipatory discourses. But if the new materialisms is a branch of research in which diverse conversations are being engaged across a variety of disciplines, a number of theorists within the discourse are openly sceptical of the place of theology within the conversation. The next chapter will turn towards the question of a theological engagement with the new materialisms.

## Chapter 2

### The Doctrine of Creation and Non-Dichotomous Thought

Can Christian theology be hospitable to non-dichotomous approaches to culture and the material world, approaches which aim at recovering a sense of the agency of the material world for political thought? If this seems too vague an enquiry to begin with, the level of hostility towards Christian theology across new materialist literature might still suggest that it is worthwhile setting our investigations within the context of this broad debate. Theorist Jane Bennett, in an article which compares the vitalism of 20<sup>th</sup> Century biologist Hans Driesch favourably against what she terms the “naïve vitalism of soul” propounded by the pro-life movement, comes close to blankly suggesting that dogmatic Christian claims are unwelcome at the table of new materialist enquiry. Unpicking Bennett’s understanding of the theological dogmas she rejects, as well as the nature of their incompatibility with the materialism she hopes to articulate, will help us to arrive at a narrower set of questions as we explore what a theological engagement with the new materialisms might look like.

To begin, a discussion of Bennett’s interest in modern vitalism will be necessary. Bennett describes her work as developing a materialism in which “matter is an active principle”, and in which “non-human materialities (electricity, fats)” are “themselves bona fide agents”.<sup>220</sup> Though her own views stand in disagreement with the conclusions drawn by modern vitalists like Driesch, Bennett nevertheless finds conversation with this tradition helpful for articulating her own position, which in one way falls somewhere between modern vitalism and mechanistic materialism, and in another way attempts to go beyond both.<sup>221</sup>

Bennett describes Driesch’s vitalism as “born in the negative spaces” of a machine model of the material world: that is, Driesch works from the supposition that “matter” can be equated with “mechanism”, and he assumes that matter operates along predictable

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<sup>220</sup> Jane Bennett, “A Vitalist Stopover on the Way to a New Materialism,” in *Material Feminisms*, eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Heckman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 47.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

patterns of cause and effect, chains of physico-chemical action.<sup>222</sup> When Driesch's laboratory research on cell-division in sea urchins calls the adequacy of this mechanistic account into question, he finds himself positing the necessity of a non-mechanistic (and therefore, by his logic, non-material) agent, responsible for the capacities of organic matter that the machine model cannot account for. Morphogenesis, which refers to both the process by which an organism moves from a less complex state to a more complex one, and the process by which a damaged organism repairs itself, cannot not be mechanistic in character, according to Driesch, because to claim such we would require us to imagine a machine which could be divided multiple times and continue to function – a self-repairing, self-complexifying mechanism.<sup>223</sup> This being inconceivable to Driesch, he theorises the existence of a life principle called "*entelechy*", a principle not reducible to matter itself (that is, not a property of matter) but responsible for animating it.

Bennett finds Driesch an interesting proponent of vitalism because, while he distinguishes life from matter, he pushes this binary to its limit,<sup>224</sup> consistently refusing the characterisation of *entelechy* as either a "positive" or a "psychic" force, and labouring to make the association of life and matter as close as possible without altogether collapsing the binary. The details of his argument are less important here than the way his conclusions demonstrate the ideas he tries to keep in tension. Driesch contends that the opposite of "mechanical" is not "psychical", but simply "non-mechanical": it should be possible to imagine a principle animating matter which is non-material without being ethereal. For Driesch *entelechy* pushes forward and suspends the potential within material arrangements, but cannot go beyond the potential already present within matter. *Entelechy* must be seen as a force which cannot exist independent of matter.

In understanding the points on which Bennett commends Driesch, and her points of contention with his vitalism, a picture of her own position emerges. Here we find some critical convergences with the themes of the new materialisms as we saw them in the previous chapter. Bennett applauds Driesch's refusal to slip into a Cartesian model – the ghost haunting the machine –<sup>225</sup> and she writes that "as an attempt to name a force or agency that is naturalistic but never fully spatialized, actualized or calculable...this

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>225</sup> Or, he doesn't "*spiritualise the vital agent*". Ibid., 56.

vitalist gesture is not inimical to the materialism I seek.”<sup>226</sup> Insofar as Driesch was attempting to enlarge our picture of nature, he was on the right track. Bennett also understands Driesch’s work in this regard to be motivated by the laudable aim of propounding a sense of nature’s indeterminacy against threats to the concept of freedom. Scientific determinism, with its endless chains of cause and effect, left no room for the spontaneous, the new, and Driesch was right to question such a model.<sup>227</sup> Driesch also finds favour with Bennett because of his somewhat ambivalent position when it comes to human exceptionalism. Bennett identifies “the desire to view man as the apex of worldly existence” as one of the motivations driving many forms of vitalism, since positing a vital force allows us to view nature as hierarchically ordered from more vital down to less vital or even non-vital forms, depending on where the vital principle is operating most intensively.<sup>228</sup> Though there are shades of this idea in Driesch’s vitalism, he “also believes that some analogue of knowing and willing exists in all organic processes”.<sup>229</sup>

Bennett’s complaint with Driesch is that his challenge to scientific determinism does not go deep enough. The inadequacy of the machine model, instead of pushing him to revise his understanding of matter completely, leads him merely to hypothesize the existence of something extrinsic to matter. Bennett quotes (with approval) Mikhail Bakhtin, who argued in 1926 that Driesch too easily accepted the *type* of mechanistic model available to him, and failed to imagine a “relentlessly self-constructing, developing machine [which]...builds itself not from pre-prepared parts, but from self-constructed ones.”<sup>230</sup> Matter understood in light of such an analogy would itself be both living and undetermined. Driesch may enlarge our picture of “nature”, but he leaves our picture of matter untouched; Bennett wishes to revise our understanding of matter itself.

Thus Bennett’s critique of Driesch’s vitalism exemplifies her impulse to affirm ontological monism or immanentism: matter and what might be called culture (that which is undetermined, innovative and free) are not ontologically discrete entities but are part of the same material whole. There is an impulse towards ascribing a certain kind of fluidity and generativity to the material world, especially clear in Bennett’s endorsement of Bakhtin’s self-complexifying machine model. And there is a will to throw human

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin cited in Bennett, see *ibid.*, 56.

exceptionalism into question by emphasising the materiality of human practices, their continuity with the intrinsic character of matter itself.

What then of Bennett's assertions of the incompatibility of Christian claims with such a redescription of the material world? It is important to note here that her critique comes via her rejection of what she calls the "culture of life" movement, by which she mostly refers to Catholic sanctity of life teachings (exemplified in Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical "Evangelium Vitae"), and the "pro-life" political movement in the USA.<sup>231</sup> However, a number of features of her article blur the lines between the "culture of life" movement and the wider Christian tradition, so that her criticisms could be read as directed at a wider target. Bennett neglects to explicitly signal how the beliefs she regards as hallmarks of the "culture of life" might align or diverge from mainstream orthodox views. She writes of the "culture of life" vitalism as just one instance of "dogmatic forms of Christian theology" "colonizing" the gaps in scientific enquiry (and here it is unclear in which sense she intends the term "dogmatic" – does she mean relating to the fundamental articles of Christian faith, or its more colloquial usage, denoting blind or unquestioning belief?).<sup>232</sup> Several times she slips into more sweeping dismissals of theistic belief, ending her article by endorsing a materialism "which eschews the life-matter binary and does not believe in God or spiritual forces".<sup>233</sup> In short, while Bennett finds in the "culture of life" a particular penchant for violence, her attribution of this to a set of beliefs she seems to regard as mainstream or dogmatic means there is a much larger conversation at stake.

According to Bennett, the "culture of life" movement could be considered an expression of vitalism because, like Driesch, its adherents view matter as "passive and predetermined in its operation",<sup>234</sup> and insist on "life" as an extrinsic principle or force.<sup>235</sup> Regrettably and unlike Driesch, Christian vitalism understands life as a force "whose existence is not tied to its relationship to matter".<sup>236</sup> Life is presented as detachable from embodiment, and Christian vitalism thus supports, it seems, a starker dualism between life and matter because life is considered a positive force. It also supports a firmer hierarchy within the structure of nature because

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

Human exceptionalism is not a contingent event, an accident of evolution, or a function of the distinctive material composition of the human body. Rather, an omnipotent being (“the Almighty”) implants a divine spark or soul into the human individual.<sup>237</sup>

The idea that man “is the most animate or mobile, the most free or capable of action” allied with the “idea that there exist two ontologically distinct substances (brute matter and spirited life)” all render adherents of “culture of life” theology liable to violently exploit “nature”.<sup>238</sup> The firm belief in a static and unchanging hierarchy, a teleological structure underwritten by its “Designer”, also leads Christians to ignore scientific advances which suggest the material world might be an open and surprisingly fluid system.<sup>239</sup>

The criticism that Christian theology has supported acts of domination over nature is nothing new, and there will be no attempt here to dispute the fact that certain articulations of the doctrines of creation and of the *imago Dei* might be implicated in the kinds of attitudes towards the material environment that Bennett describes. What is of more interest is Bennett’s apparent assumption that these doctrines are incompatible *per se* with the metaphysical propositions of the new materialisms. Divine transcendence underwrites human transcendence over “matter”, Bennett seems to assert, because being made in God’s image and as “ensouled” beings, humans are assumed to be ontologically differentiated from the world they inhabit. This immutable binary of man/nature runs in strict opposition to an immanentism which understands both culture and nature to be intrinsically material and ontologically continuous with each other, and which presents humans as limited by their materiality. Insofar as these doctrines underwrite a static structure to creation, with man at its pinnacle, they also undermine any sense of nature’s fluidity, its perpetual reconfiguration in the process of “becoming”.

Bennett does not stand alone in highlighting these concerns, and it is worth drawing attention to the work of William Connolly in this regard. In his article “Materialities of Experience”, Connolly displays a degree of sympathy with theistic belief, maintaining that affirmations of humanity’s belonging to the material world “in both their theistic and nontheistic forms” are needed in the fight for “pluralism, equality,

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 59, 60.

and ecological sensitivity.”<sup>240</sup> Nevertheless, his description of a “philosophy of immanence” – the position he believes Merleau-Ponty moved close to in his revision of modern concepts of the subject and nature – is articulated to the exclusion of belief in divine transcendence:

By immanence I mean a philosophy of becoming in which the universe is not dependent on a higher power. It is reducible to neither mechanistic materialism, dualism, theoteology nor the absent God of minimal theology. It concurs with the last three philosophies that there is more to reality than actuality. But that “more” is not given by a robust or minimal God...Rather, there are uncertain exchanges between stabilized formations and the mobile forces that subsist within and below them.<sup>241</sup>

Connolly, like Bennett, makes an association between mechanistic materialism and belief in a divine power set apart from the material world. Though the connection between these concepts is left ambiguous, there is at least the hint of the suggestion that they form two sides of the same coin: divine transcendence is seen as somehow underwriting an understanding of the material world as fundamentally dependent and therefore static, unfree and non-vital.

In light of the self-consciously anti-theological articulations that both Bennett and Connolly offer in describing their approaches to matter, three questions might be identified as important starting points for theological engagement with new materialist ontologies. First, are dogmatic articulations of the doctrine of creation – with their insistence on the transcendence of God and their concomitant assertion of Creation’s utter dependence – inimical to non-dichotomous thought? Another way of putting this would be to ask if God’s “otherness” underwrites human “otherness” in relation to nature, so that dualistic approaches to culture and nature can be traced back to a fundamental “dualism” between God and creation?<sup>242</sup> Second, are Christian concepts of selfhood or the soul necessarily tied up with a life-matter binary, or an ontological distinction between human life and mere matter? Third, do Christian ascriptions of a teleological structure to creation – its existence for God, its incessant bent towards its creator – render

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<sup>240</sup> William Connolly, “Materialities of Experience,” in *Material Feminisms*, eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Heckman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 197.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 178-9.

<sup>242</sup> I intend to challenge the idea that the traditional Christian understanding of divine transcendence describes a *dualism* between God and Creation at a later stage in this essay.

Christian thought incapable of allowing for a free, fluid, innovative, or productive universe?

The following chapters will attempt to address the first question about the dependence of creation on a transcendent God, through an engagement with the work of Rowan Williams. While it will be impossible to give a full treatment of our additional questions about either Christian understandings of self-hood and the life-matter binary, or Christian teleology and an ontology of becoming, there will be moments for highlighting where our current area of research touches on these concerns. Williams provides a useful theological voice for a number of reasons. His emphasis on ongoing and open conversation as essential to theological integrity means that his theological work is characterised by diverse engagements with interlocutors both historical and contemporary, Christian and secular.<sup>243</sup> On several occasions, Williams has formulated his understanding of the doctrine of creation in response to feminist writers whose concerns about divine transcendence are closely related to those we have read in Bennett. In his essay “On Being Creatures”,<sup>244</sup> Williams addresses Sallie McFague’s criticism that “the classical view of creation sees it as an exercise of ‘cultural’ power, the giving of form to the (external) formless.”<sup>245</sup> McFague rejects transcendent models of the relation between God and his creation in favour of a concept of the world as “God’s body”. Models that see God’s interests as “bound up with the world’s” are preferred by McFague because where there is a continuity between creator and creation there can be

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<sup>243</sup> In his essay “Theological Integrity” Williams defines critical integrity as the ability to “speak in a way which allows of...response and continuation”. This leads him to wrestle with the question of how religious talk can claim to have “integrity” where it also “purports to be about the context of the moral universe” (put otherwise, where it threatens to foreclose conversation by assuming a totalising perspective). His answer is that to have integrity Christian theology must show itself as “uniquely under judgement”: it must demonstrate in its workings its task of holding “the complexity its human world” up to divine judgement (a judgement it cannot complete). Conversation is thus the *modus operandi* of theology in two senses. First, in the sense that Christian theology is always in conversation with a history of human perspectives: theology will never “move too far from the particular, with all its irresolution and resistance to systematizing” and it always tells a story of how “imperfect, distorting responses to God” generate “their own re-formation”. Second, Christian theology is conversational insofar as it is liturgical: the God perceived in history is “constantly addressed as well as talked *about*.” See *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 5-7. More on this in the following chapter.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-78.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

no temptation to model one's behaviour on a God utterly without any investment in the life of creation, as if the best form of life were one which repudiated involvement in or dependency upon the material world.<sup>246</sup>

Clearly McFague would concur with Bennett that the stark differentiation of God from his creation underwrites a dangerously dualistic account of the relationship between man and matter. Similarly, in his 1994 article for *Augustinian Studies*, Williams engages critically with Anne Primavesi's assertion that traditional readings of Genesis 1-3 present the physical world "as an artefact, made or constructed by God out of inert matter" and that "Whenever we affirm belief in God as "Maker of the Universe" we are referring to this image, and reinforcing the claim to have and to exercise "spiritual power" over matter."<sup>247</sup> Again, there are shades of Bennett here, and this suggests that one possible approach to our first line of enquiry could be to demonstrate, following Williams's response to McFague and Primavesi, that Bennett's understanding of divine transcendence is not quite how the doctrine of creation and its implications are presented in their classical formulations. Such an argument could be sketched as follows.

### **i) Rowan Williams on "Being Creatures"**

Williams understands McFague and Primavesi as primarily concerned with eradicating the theological emphasis on disjunction or distance between God and creation, because they assume that this inevitably funds a "wholly non-negotiable asymmetry" of "absolute dependence opposed to absolute self-sufficiency", and because they believe that such an asymmetry must imply domination.<sup>248</sup> Treating these anxieties sympathetically, and conceding the "disastrous possibilities of a certain kind of God-world differentiation, especially when coupled with a parallel spirit-nature disjunction",<sup>249</sup> Williams nevertheless responds that these apprehensions show a failure to grasp what the doctrine of creation means "in the hands of those who have most carefully dealt with it".<sup>250</sup> Scrupulous attention must be paid both to the dogmatic affirmation of creation *ex nihilo*,

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>247</sup> Anne Primavesi cited in Rowan Williams, "'Good for Nothing'? Augustine on Creation," *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994): 9.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>249</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 67.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

and the tensions or subtleties in how the “otherness” of God is articulated within Christian tradition, because these concepts attempt to secure “a model of creation that should never, in fact, produce the ideas attacked”.<sup>251</sup>

The Judaeo-Christian narrative of creation was peculiar in the antique world because of its emphasis on a creation brought forth from nothing by the free utterance of God.<sup>252</sup> This Biblical tradition came about in the context of Israel’s return from Babylon, at which time both Israel’s Exodus from Egypt and its deliverance from exile began to be celebrated as events which echoed God’s act of creation.<sup>253</sup> Read with their analogous relationship in mind, creation, Exodus, and return are events in which God calls something out of non-existence – the cosmos, a new community, or a new identity – God’s word thus “establishing the very possibility of an answer.”<sup>254</sup> Where traditions of God moulding something out of formless material existed, these gave way to a more dominant narrative of God as sole originator,<sup>255</sup> and this is the tradition that early Christian exponents were concerned with articulating, among them, Augustine.

Augustine is a somewhat confusing voice in this regard, however, because of his constant references to form and matter (Book XII of *Confessions* is rife with the imagery of God creating out of formless matter),<sup>256</sup> and Williams notes that Augustine’s name is one of ill omen amongst feminist theologians for his use of these terms.<sup>257</sup> Williams’s reading of Augustine nevertheless suggests that the latter’s understanding of the operation of form and matter is fully compatible with creation *ex nihilo*. In the wake of seventeenth century thought, these terms evoke an image of “solid things and ideas”. For the ancient world, the dialectic of form and matter was something more like the interaction between actuality and potentiality. At one end of the spectrum was pure form (by definition, changeless perfection) and at the other end matter (by definition, not a thing at all, but what we might call pure potentiality). Matter within this scheme cannot properly be thought of as “passive” since pure potentiality can have no qualities (and as soon as we are talking about something with qualities “we have begun talking about *form*”). As

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<sup>251</sup> Williams, “Good for Nothing,” 15.

<sup>252</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 67.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>256</sup> Especially Book XII, viii. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 249-50.

<sup>257</sup> Williams, “Good for Nothing,” 10

Williams puts it, “The action of form on matter is not the imposition of one thing on another, let alone one system on another: it is simply the process of actualisation itself, the process by which organization appears.”<sup>258</sup> Augustine, on such an understanding, can say of creation “You made this next-to-nothing out of nothing” and “from this formlessness, from this next-to-nothing, you made all things of which this mutable world consists,”<sup>259</sup> and can thus name God as both the ground of all potential, and the one who calls things from non-existence into existence.

One possible response to McFague and Primavesi already comes into view at this point. Creation *ex nihilo* entails that God’s act of “creation” can, in one sense, be better understood as a kind of situation than as any kind of change, event, or process, since to call something into existence is to establish the very conditions for speaking of changes, events or processes. As Aquinas understood it

the doctrine is equally compatible with thinking the universe had an identifiable beginning and thinking it exists eternally. It simply tells you that the entire situation of the universe, at any given moment, exists as a real situation because of God’s reality being, as it were, turned away from God to generate what is not God.<sup>260</sup>

The implications of such a doctrine make concerns about God’s arbitrary or oppressive power over creation somewhat nonsensical, if power is to be understood not as a property but as function of relations between two entities, something “exercised *by x over y*”. Creation as an act cannot be an exercise of despotic or “cultural” power, Williams argues, because creation “is not exercised on anything.”<sup>261</sup> As its absolute origin, God is not a threat to creation’s freedom, as if He were an alien power conforming creation to a form of existence that is unnatural to it. Creation has no existence outside of God’s will for it: everything is “because God wants it so.”<sup>262</sup> Williams’s first line of argument is thus to point out that the doctrine of creation makes it logically difficult to describe God’s dealings with creation in the ways that McFague and Primavesi want to, since “domination” and “coercion” are terms which only really make sense in describing relations within a system,<sup>263</sup> and they cease to make sense the moment we define creation

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>259</sup> Book XII, viii, Augustine, *Confessions*, 250.

<sup>260</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 67.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>263</sup> Williams, “Good for Nothing,” 19.

as a system which exists in utter dependence on the gratuitous act of one completely “other” to it.

Creation *ex nihilo*, in telling us that creation is that which is unilaterally dependent, and in presupposing that it exists without thereby fulfilling any need or serving any lack we could ascribe to God, is also, for Williams, a way into a positive insight about the character of God’s life. Here we come to a second way in which the doctrine of creation defends against the idea of divine domination. To say that God desires the existence of creation “groundlessly”, or that His desire for it is nothing to do with its “use” for Himself, is to say that in creating He establishes Himself as a “being for”, one “whose joy is eternally in the joy of another.”<sup>264</sup> As Williams puts it, the

absolute difference between God and the world presupposed by the doctrine of creation from nothing becomes also a way of asserting the continuity between the being of God and the act of creation as the utterance and ‘overflow’ of the divine life.<sup>265</sup>

If God sustains what is completely “other” by nature of its contingency, we are prompted to see creation as an expression of a characteristically dispossessive divine love. A God whose character is self-giving love cannot dominate because, for such a God “to act for God’s sake *is* for God to act for our sake.”<sup>266</sup>

To express this insight another way, and to turn it towards the question of what *humanity’s* relationship might be to the rest of creation (the other side of McFague and Primavesi’s contention with divine transcendence), we must go beyond the mere fact of creation’s existence to look at the kind of existence it has, and at this point the language of process becomes appropriate. Augustine’s thought is once more a vehicle for Williams’s discussion of these themes, and it may be important to clarify the nature of this relationship. While Williams’s agreement or divergence with the detail of Augustine’s scheme is left somewhat ambiguous, he finds that many of the tensions Augustine works to maintain are the characteristic tensions that “*any* intelligible Christian theology of creation” will be obliged to wrestle with.<sup>267</sup> That Augustine locates creation in a realm where form acts on matter (in other words, that he locates creation in the realm

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<sup>264</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 74.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Williams, “Good for Nothing,” 11.

of time, change or flux)<sup>268</sup> helps us to identify a central movement between disjunction and continuity in Augustine's attempts to describe the relationship between God and creation. This movement, necessary within any articulation of the doctrine of creation because of the need to hold together the goodness of creation and its existence in time,<sup>269</sup> is significant for helping us to reflect on the character of God.

We have seen that for Augustine, the fact that creation exists in *actuality* rather than fantasy already implies that it exists in *coherence* – bearing in mind that to speak of anything real we are inevitably drawn into speaking of what has form (intelligible features or structure).<sup>270</sup> This entails that creation participates in God, or that God has set something consistent with the form of His life outside of Himself. But for Augustine there is also a sense in which creation is being drawn towards greater coherence, that different potentials are realised more or less fully over time. And if creation is defined as an entity which exists in shifting arrangements of flux and equilibrium as different levels of organisation are reached, then “the difference between God and creation cannot be elided.”<sup>271</sup> Potential implies lack, and to speak of God as the self-sufficient source of existence or the grounds for all of creation's goods means to affirm that “there is nothing that is *potentially* good for God.”<sup>272</sup> In this way God and creation are irreducibly “other” because only creation achieves its goods in time.

Williams identifies a circularity in the fact that in reading Augustine, the “continuities, the ways in which creation shares in the sort of life that is God's, steer us inexorably back to the fundamental difference”, and it is precisely this circularity which guards against assertions about divine or human exploitation.<sup>273</sup> If the ways in which creation manifests something of the life of God are also the ways it manifests its utter difference – in other words, if it exhibits its coherence through existence over time – we are prompted to think of God's revelation of himself in creation as somehow bound up with creation's “otherness”. And if this again leads us to think of a God who is “turned

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<sup>268</sup> Pure form could have no history because there would be no working out of potential, pure matter could have no history because there can be no measurement of change in a realm of pure potential. See *ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>269</sup> The need to affirm creation's coherence or intelligibility or goodness is tied up with the affirmation that God's acts are always consistent with Himself.

<sup>270</sup> Williams, “Good for Nothing,” 14-15, 17-18.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

outwards”, a God of self-giving love, then we might say that creation speaks of God best when it is most manifestly other.

What would it mean for humans to “image God” within such a scheme? What Williams draws attention to in the paradox of continuity and discontinuity suggests that a dualistic distinction between humanity and the rest of creation may not be what the doctrine of the *imago Dei* proposes. Far from imaging God by transcending creation, humans are the image of God *as humans*, as “creatures” immersed in the finite and material universe. That is, like the rest of creation, we are only transparent to God’s life in our utter materiality and our timefulness. Augustine’s *Confessions*, Williams writes, remind us constantly that “God’s definitive clue to the divine life, and how we may open ourselves to it, is the event in which the everlasting Word and Wisdom shapes and speaks and acts out a human and material history, telling us that there is no way to God but through time.”<sup>274</sup> And Williams himself follows this insight in his own presentation of what an appropriate Christian spirituality must be. We are driven down and down into our materiality and timefulness in order to relate to God, such that

Contemplative prayer classically finds its focus in the awareness of God at the centre of the praying person’s being – God as that by which I am myself – and simultaneously, God at the centre of the whole world’s being: a solidarity in creatureliness.<sup>275</sup>

Further thought would need to be given to the issue of where a theology of the soul might fit within this picture (this goes beyond the scope of our argument but there will be room for a few words about the direction such a discussion might take in our concluding comments). Here, however, it will be adequate to say that while Christian theology may wish to emphasise issues around human consciousness as part of its account of what it means to be human in the image of God,<sup>276</sup> the classical doctrine of creation may also demand that we resist tethering our accounts of the *imago Dei* to any starkly dualistic spirit-body or humanity-nature distinction.

If the above point is metaphysical in its thrust, Williams’s discussion of contemplation and his references to “solidarity” also point us towards a certain way of

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>275</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 76.

<sup>276</sup> There will be more on the issue of consciousness in the forthcoming discussion, where it is presented by Williams as creation’s self-knowing, which is generative of new forms and thus participates in God’s revelation of himself as an unbounded intelligence perceiving the ways His nature can be reflected in time.

relating to the material world, and here we move into issues of praxis. To image a God who makes and sustains a timeful creation means to love in ways that seek to preserve the integrity of the “other”. Treating created things as means to other ends is inappropriate, and Williams, following Aquinas, makes this point provocatively by denying that we should love created things as a means even to loving God: if God himself “does not want to be Everything”,<sup>277</sup> then to value created goods for their utility instead of their inherent worth is to “misunderstand the nature of our unconditional dependence.”<sup>278</sup> Dependence means that what exists does so because of God’s desire for it, and to realise this in practice means both to treat our own situation as “given”, and to treat other created things as “gifts”.

And if, in these ways, the doctrine of the creation entails an imperative towards what Williams refers to as the “art” of being a creature,<sup>279</sup> it also resources us to claim the freedom we are given to carry this task out. Williams’s argument here begins with a number of closely related observations about the human condition. The origins of human domination or exploitation of creation are rooted in a fear of unbalanced or diseased dependency, and a will for autonomy or a sense of identity. To “shore up” our independence over-against the demands of others we habitually draw on “support from outside ourselves”,<sup>280</sup> and thus we are caught in a double bind. Fearing dependence we attempt to gain control over our environment through the means at our disposal, and in doing so we “intensify our dependence on those external factors which assure us of worth or meaning, while denying more and more stridently that we are involved in dependence at all.”<sup>281</sup>

Learning to distinguish our fundamental need for identity from our accumulated dependencies on “specific facets” of our environment may get us some way to avoiding the enslavement to our environment that results from our attempts to transcend it.<sup>282</sup> Learning to name and define our fundamental need properly may also be helpful: seeing “our need to imagine ourselves as agents or givers as a need to know we exist *for another*” might be a healthier construal of our drive for agency than a concept which legitimises self-sufficiency as an ultimate goal. Williams certainly endorses a conception

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<sup>277</sup> Williams quotes Jacques Pohier here. *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*

of self-hood as “identity in relation”, noting that “We can imagine ourselves as self-regulating entities, but can only make sense of – let alone *value* or *love* – what is thus imagined by adopting the standpoint of another: by presupposing relation.”<sup>283</sup> Self-awareness, after all, only arrives in the commerce of language, where we recognise ourselves as other because we are spoken to.<sup>284</sup> However, neither a strategy of recognising our need for identity, nor any amount of care in defining such a need, can ultimately address the fundamental anxiety that lies behind our coercive tendencies.<sup>285</sup> Williams maintains that we are left still with a problematic of our vulnerability to the “other”, since “If my identity is given by the “conversation” I enter at birth, that conversation is in turn a *generated* as well as a generating context.”<sup>286</sup> The conversation which forms us also makes us essential to the self-definition of others, and this is a situation of risk, where others may “lay unacceptable claim on me” as part of their own search for identity.<sup>287</sup>

What is needed here, Williams suggests, is some basis for a fundamental act of trust as an answer to our basic anxiety in the face of our vulnerability to others. This is where the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* comes in, with its God as maker of what is definitively not God. Such an understanding allows us to see our identities as “rooted in God’s freedom”, our existence as underwritten by God’s will for us. The doctrine also allows us to trust for the very reason that it presents God’s act of creation as having no real benefit for God. God, as the self-sufficient sole origin of creation, gives without needing anything in return. He cannot then use us for His own ends, or as Williams puts it, creation “cannot be a device to assist God in being God”.<sup>288</sup> All of this provides a security which can be claimed without an attendant rejection of our situation of dependence, or our solidarity with all else that depends on the free act of God. To the contrary, the doctrine of creation sets us free to admit our creatureliness – to understand our situation (with that of the rest of our world) as one of absolute dependence, limitedness and death –<sup>289</sup> without being debilitated by that admission.

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 78.

What we have been building up until this point is a picture of how a fundamental distinction between creator and creation – framed in terms of contingency versus non-contingency or timefulness versus changelessness – instead of instituting other dualisms, might be instrumental in their undoing. To summarise, creation *ex nihilo* makes the language of “dualism” problematic when applied to divine transcendence. By naming all reality as grounded in God’s reality, it denies any “real relation” between God and creation (as if they inhabited the same system), such that it becomes difficult to cast God as a rival to creation’s freedom. Using the more appropriate language of dichotomy or distinction to describe divine transcendence, we then begin to see that drawing an absolute distinction between God and creation might be a safer theological proposition than its alternatives. For God to create and sustain what is truly “other”, without necessity motivating such an act, expresses something about the divine life and its commitment to creation’s good. But if creation reflects God through its contingency, we are led to question the validity of forms of human exceptionalism which justify human domination over “nature” by casting humans as “transcendent” in any way analogous to God. Humans are to relate to God as “creatures” and as part of a material creation. The freedom to be creatures without anxiety is provided in the recognition that God’s independence from creation is absolute.

Some of the conclusions we have drawn in this brief discussion relate clearly to some of Bennett’s objections (especially where it has been argued that the *imago Dei* should not be overlaid with a spirit-body or man-matter dualism). One further comment might be necessary, recalling that what McFague and Primavesi present as a culture/nature binary (underwritten by what is understood to be God’s exercise of “cultural” power), Bennett frames a little differently as a life/matter binary. Bennett believes divine transcendence entails a distinction between life and matter in which life is seen as an extrinsic substance or force, injected into and animating different kinds of matter to different degrees. It would be consistent with the picture we have so far drawn, to respond that creation *ex nihilo* poses a challenge to the kind of life/matter binary that Bennett identifies within “vitalist” philosophies. Creation *ex nihilo* prohibits us from understanding anything in the created universe as “outside” of God’s life, such that the idea of God interjecting here and there to breathe life into an otherwise inanimate material entity becomes problematic. We might, in fact, be tempted to say that creation simply is vital, insofar as the fact that it *is* tells us that it already shares in God’s life. On a related

note, and again throwing doubt on the compatibility between the doctrine of creation and the premises of vitalism, we might draw attention to one of the conclusions Williams derives as part of the insight that “God does not want to be everything”. God, Williams suggests, does not “intrude into the integrity of this or that aspect of the world” either as

justification or explanation for specific events. If the explanation of every event, every determination of being, every phenomenon or decision were simply or directly God, then the life of creation would not be genuinely other than God. God grounds the reality and, in the theological sense, the goodness of the world’s life, but does not answer specific ‘Why?’ questions.<sup>290</sup>

By naming God as the one who wills and preserves creation’s integrity, Christian theology itself teaches us to be cautious of attempts to slot God in where explanation fails (for example, where what appear to be stable formations give way to more complex structures, or at those moments when matter appears to move from less animate to more animate forms). Within the framework we have explored, there are no strong reasons to defend a “life” principle, understood in Bennett’s terms as a force or substance ontologically distinct from matter. Neither are there obvious reasons to reject the concept of a material universe capable of complexification, innovation, and growth.

We may then begin to see ways in which certain articulations of the theology of creation open the kind of space that a philosophy of ontological monism could plausibly inhabit. But while some key concepts have been identified, and some central ideas characteristic of Williams’s thought have been introduced, another approach to the question of compatibility between a conception of creation as unilaterally dependent on a transcendent God, and the new materialist programme, might be possible. This approach builds on the argument already outlined, and will rely on a culmination of themes present in many of Williams’s writings but made more explicit in some of his most recent work on the theology of language. The next chapter will go beyond thinking about how divine transcendence may imply continuity between materiality and human culture or language. It will do so by turning that proposition on its head, by reflecting on how attention to this continuity may lead us in turn to contemplate something like the framework posited in the Christian doctrine of creation.

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 75.

## Chapter 3

### God and the Habits of Language: The Continuity of Language and Matter and the Reframing of Natural Theology

In February 2012 a dialogue took place between Williams and Richard Dawkins, in which Williams's very interesting position in relation to scientific determinism, and something like what Bennett has described as "Christian vitalism", emerged.<sup>291</sup> In a number of exchanges in the debate, Williams rejects the sets of alternatives that Dawkins appears to assume are open to Christian thought when it is confronted by evolutionary theory as an explanation for the origins of life on one hand, and when it comes to questions of free will and determinism on the other.

Jokingly referring to himself as a "cultural Anglican", Dawkins's first contribution to the debate is to quote, with his own adaption, the opening lines of a hymn by William Walsham How:

'It is a thing most wonderful, almost too wonderful to be,' that, at least on this planet...the laws of physics have conspired to make the collisions of atoms get together to produce... plants, trees, kangaroos, insects, and us...to produce collections of matter, collections of atoms, which don't just obey Newton's laws in a passive way...but which move and jump, and spring and hunt, and flee and mate, and think.<sup>292</sup>

The intricacy of what natural selection has produced gives the illusion of design, Dawkins contends, such that many people have difficulty believing a Darwinian explanation, and resort to an unsatisfactory resolution to the problem by saying "an intelligence did it".<sup>293</sup> In thinking about the origins of the universe, we are faced with the decision, as Dawkins sees it, between two incompatible and competing explanations. Either we accept a naturalistic account of everything that exists, or we introduce divine intervention at the same explanatory level.

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<sup>291</sup> Dialogue with Professor Richard Dawkins and Archbishop Rowan Williams, Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford University, 23 February, 2012. Full video and audio available at <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2371/dialogue-with-archbishop-rowan-williams-and-professor-richard-dawkins>, last accessed on 13/05/2016.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

Dawkins appears to interpret Williams as assuming the latter position, where early in the debate Williams expresses a wariness about simply saying “we have recourse to the laws of physics, and that’s it” when it comes to the question of consciousness. Neither Darwin, nor recent scientific exploration, Williams contends, give us much insight into how self-consciousness, or the first person perspective, emerges. Dawkins’s rejoinder to this statement is to affirm his own firm commitment to a materialist explanation for consciousness (“consciousness emerges in brains”), though he concedes there is a gap in scientific accounts where the emergence of self-reflexive consciousness is concerned (“nobody understands how, and I regard that as one of the problems for the future”).<sup>294</sup> Dawkins nevertheless cautions that where we identify gaps in scientific inquiry, we should remain agnostic until we have a scientific explanation, rather than “slotting God in”.<sup>295</sup>

Williams’s response to this is key in demonstrating an important subtlety in terms of the way he believes theistic accounts of the origins of the universe should be framed:

I’m not suggesting we buy in God to get us a cheap get out of jail card...but what I am interested in is what it means to say that this is the kind of universe in which consciousness will happen, given these coordinates. Because it seems to me that the question is not, ‘Is there some point at which God interferes to say “Let there be consciousness”.’ The question is, does an entire universe, a system of physical law, which produces something not obviously physical, does that require some context of intelligence that is not simply the intelligence of one finite?<sup>296</sup>

Dawkins, it seems, understands Williams as attempting to do what Bennett accuses dogmatic Christian theology of continually doing: colonising the gaps within mechanistic accounts of the universe. What Williams actually wishes to do, the above response suggests, is simultaneously more modest, and more complex. He is precisely not interested in bringing God in at any supposed moment of distinction between “mere” matter and self-conscious matter. What he wants is to consider how a material universe can be “anthropogenic”; he is interested in thinking about the kinds of questions we are prompted to ask *after* we have identified this universe as “the kind of universe which has

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

produced conscious language-using subjects (that is, us).”<sup>297</sup> Williams, in other words, is not only comfortable with the idea that consciousness emerges somehow out of materiality, but he hints that a certain kind of theistic account of the world could arise from reflection on this very idea, and on the questions that the existence of self-consciousness raises about the character of matter itself.

On that last point, the questions that consciousness may prompt us to ask about matter, the discourse between Williams and Dawkins about the issue of determinism is highly suggestive. Pressed to discuss his position on free will, Dawkins comments that he has been misunderstood as a genetic determinist when in fact he understands genes to be only the fundamental unit of natural selection. Dawkins understands himself not as a *genetic* determinist, but simply as a determinist, given his assumption that everything, including human actions, is predetermined by systems and events in the universe. Self-consciousness, and the human capacity to take decisions, Dawkins believes, can only be understood as “illusions”. His rationale for taking this position rests on his understanding of the alternative: “I don’t think that you can get away from determinism by postulating a ghost inside which takes decisions which are somehow independent of physical reality.”<sup>298</sup> Because Dawkins understands the universe to be mechanistic in its operation, he believes we are faced with the choice either of postulating a non-material entity capable of free action, such as the human “soul”, or we are committed to regarding with suspicion what experience presents to us as our ability to decide. Williams’s reaction is to ask whether this presentation of the options is adequate, or whether our experience of consciousness and our felt ability to manipulate our environment demand that we conceive of materiality rather differently:

I don’t think that believing in free will commits you to a ghost taking decisions independent of your physical reality. But...if the distinction between absolutely inert stuff and mind is not quite where it is frequently thought to lie; if the universe does not just break down into – sort of – “ghostly stuff” and “hard stuff”, then a decision is not something which some independent homunculus inside me makes, never mind what happens, it is something that emerges from a set of physical conditions not wholly determined but innovating...<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

Evident here is the unmistakable likeness of Bennett's challenge to rethink matter, in Williams's opening of a space between mechanistic materialism and naïve vitalism. Quite fascinating for our topic is the question of how such a resemblance finds its way into this side of the argument in this particular debate, or, why the enterprise of redefining matter as in some sense active might be desirable for a theologian representing theistic belief in a discussion about the origins of the universe.

The thoughts behind Williams's comments at the Oxford debate were given a fuller airing in the 2014 Gifford Lecture series, which were published as the monograph (of the same year) *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language*.<sup>300</sup> It is the proposition of this chapter that Williams's theology of language follows the pattern of argumentation that we have just identified in his conversation with Dawkins. That is, Williams's theology of language takes mechanistic physicalism as a primary interlocutor, and his response to this philosophy shows an awareness of Cartesianism (or its linguistic equivalent, what Barad calls "representationalism", the assumption that semantic concepts transparently mediate features of the environment) as a possible alternative.<sup>301</sup> Williams, however, rejects the adequacy of both of these options for accounting for the everyday habits of speech, and *The Edge of Words* is engaged in the task of demarcating a space between them. This "space" is characterised by what could be called an agentic materiality: "thinking harder about the oddities of language" Williams writes in the opening section of this book, may "open up for us some thoughts about how the material world carries or embodies messages, how matter and meaning do not necessarily belong in different universes".<sup>302</sup> The linguistic habits he takes up invite us to think of matter as "a specific 'situation' of intelligible form" so that "the mythology of a 'naturally' meaningless or random materiality... becomes impossible to sustain",<sup>303</sup> and we must think of "the entire material environment that generates [language]" as "intrinsically capable of producing the actions we call understanding."<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014). As Williams writes in this work, and as will be highlighted in the course of our discussion of it, the lectures were also the culmination of many themes and ideas that are treated in his earlier thought.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 38 (footnote 6). Williams notes with disapproval Rorty's assumption that the only alternative to physicalism is Cartesianism.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*

As we have hinted, Williams's framing of ontological alternatives is of clear significance because of the resemblance between Bennett and Williams that can be demonstrated on this basis. This connection, and the ways in which the ontological landscape Williams sketches bears similarities to both Coole and Barad also, poses a serious challenge to Bennett's portrayal of orthodox Christian theology as a threat to non-dichotomous thought. Williams, in allowing the existence of language to prompt questions as to the character of matter itself does precisely what Bennett chastises Driesch for failing to do, but of utmost importance for our thesis is the fact that all this is explored by Williams *en route* to posing a question of ultimate context that the oddities of language might edge us towards. Above all, Williams is concerned with demonstrating how the eccentric language of orthodox Christian faith – as the representing of that which eludes representation – becomes intelligible precisely in the contemplation of a material world that is “irreducibly charged with intelligibility”.<sup>305</sup> The final part of this thesis will argue that Williams's proposition overall is for a Natural Theology in which God is not “of the gaps” as it were, another force available to routine description, but in which God might be apprehended – not grasped, but some way sensed, contemplated, or perceived – as what Eckhart might call the “terminus” of all acts of description and representation,<sup>306</sup> their ultimate hinterland.

In terms of methodology, a reader familiar with Williams work in *The Edge of Words* may note how, from a text which is engaged in multiple and (by Williams's own admission) eclectic conversations with diverse partners,<sup>307</sup> one particular conversation has been brought into relief in the discussion which follows. This is the conversation with Richard Rorty that Williams engages in order to present something of the freedom or fluidity of language, an aspect which any rigorous physicalism must deny. There are a number of considerations in the rationale for beginning with this conversation, and for spending more time with it than what its duration in the book may appear (to some readers) to warrant. The most obvious reason should already be somewhat clear. Bennett's presentation of the positioning of the new materialisms has been allowed to shape the kinds of questions that we approach Williams with: if he rejects physicalism, where do his grounds for doing so place him with regard to either a philosophy of parallel

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<sup>305</sup> Intelligible, or “congruent with the more familiar and less noticed oddities of how we speak”, see *ibid.*, x; Williams quotes Meister Eckhart, see *ibid.*, 64.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

substances, or a philosophy of agentic materiality? Williams's full response to Rorty is indispensable to the task of answering this question.

This is partly because Rorty is representative of more than one philosophical tradition. It is interesting, given earlier themes in this discussion, that Williams should choose one of the prominent voices of postmodernism to represent mechanistic materialism. More accurately in fact, and as we shall shortly discuss, Williams considers Rorty's position as a doomed-to-fail attempt to preserve a radical kind of freedom for language against the physicalism that Rorty nevertheless takes to be an ontological given. Recalling Barad's words that in postmodern thought, representationalism simply became prisoner to the problematic metaphysics it postulated, there will be space to argue that Williams appears to see Rorty in something like this light. At the very least, the thought is echoed that Rorty's postmodern response to representationalism fails because, in the end, the culture/nature dichotomy informs his understanding of the alternatives to dualism. Though the connection will need some elaboration, relating Williams to Barad in this way will help us to begin to clarify Williams's own position in relation to representationalism, which is considerably less clear than his more explicitly stated disagreement with mechanistic materialism.

On the subject of that unclarity, it should be highlighted at this point that Williams never uses the term "representationalism". The ontology it assumes – the idea of a world of things "out there" which basic descriptive language makes straightforwardly available to us "in here" through producing virtual representations for the subject – is however very much present in his work as a model to avoid.<sup>308</sup> Thus the absence of the term "representationalism" would not, perhaps, be problematic on its own. But the persistence of Williams's refusal to treat meaning and matter as ontologically distinct does appear under pressure where the prominence of a lynchpin concept in his thought on language, the pervasive activity of "representation", becomes obvious. Williams notes at the outset that representation is a fraught concept because of the word's wide variety of usages in philosophy, and indeed for our purposes his choice of terms is unfortunate.<sup>309</sup> Our discussion of Williams's disagreement with Rorty, and the way it aligns him with Barad may nevertheless help us in demonstrating that Williams's theology of language is in no

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<sup>308</sup> For example see *ibid.*, 92.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

way “representationalist” (though other arguments to reinforce this reading will also be offered).

To lay out the impending discussion in brief: we will begin with Williams’s argument for the undetermined nature of language, which he seeks to demonstrate through drawing on a number of features of language which could be broadly referred to as the difficulty and the complexity of speech. Williams’s rejection of both physicalism and representationalism and his intention to seek an ontology that avoids these alternatives will be established through this discussion. Possible tensions within his account, which might raise questions as to the success of his attempt to offer a non-dichotomous ontology, will be acknowledged. But these will also steer us helpfully into a series of clarifications (around Williams’s understanding of “representation” and “description” as linguistic registers) which will, in combination with an exploration of Williams’s account of language and embodiment, allow us to argue that Williams’s understanding of language moves him towards an account of matter as inherently innovative and meaningful. Some affinities between Williams’s ontological propositions and the work of Barad and Coole will be drawn out, with reference especially to the implications of Williams’s thought for epistemology. A final section will put Williams’s thought on language into its theological context, so as to raise a question with Williams about how reflection on the imbrications of matter and meaning might connect ultimately with reflection on a transcendent God.

## **i) Difficulty, Complexity, and the Constrained Freedom of Language**

Williams’s observations on language begin with the question of whether we “can say what we like”. The claim that speech is a physical action, a “form of physical behaviour”, though in itself somewhat uncontroversial, nevertheless throws us into a set of problems which are by no means straightforward, related to freedom and determinism. “There are those,” Williams writes, “who have not shrunk from the conclusion that [language is]...no less determined than any other form of physical behaviour.”<sup>310</sup> Such an understanding presumes that we cannot say what we like, nor do our utterances reproduce

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 35.

or reflect “what the constraints that cause it to happen are really like”; utterance could only be “a rough guide” to the stimuli at work.<sup>311</sup> The moral and logical problems with this lie fairly close to the surface, and Williams’s first undertaking in thinking about the character of language is to establish a framework for thinking about language as “undetermined”. But this characterisation itself is not clear cut. Williams promptly sees off the argument for determinism, but he is aware that the grounds he employs to do so point to some strong limits to the “freedom” of speech. Speech can be said to be free, but not arbitrary. What is meant here deserves elaboration.

The inherent paradox, that to “give reasons for believing determinism is true is to undermine determinism”, provides Williams with the first riposte to the determinist account. If we make the claim that all speech is the “mere effect” of physical causality, we behave as if the statement made is exempt from its own implications (we behave, in other words, as if our statement reflects “extra-mental truth”, where consistency would require us to regard all claims of this kind as arbitrary).<sup>312</sup> The second problem with determinism comes in where we notice the “grammar” of “future action” that we take for granted. Humans quite simply behave as if we have choice in what we say. In Williams’s example, if at some point in the future we were able to predict a person’s utterance, once told of the inevitability of that utterance, that person would be immediately able to entertain the possibility of saying something else. This suggests first the logical conundrum that this kind of prediction could not be announced “without being rendered uncertain.”<sup>313</sup> It also suggests that the options, for those who would wish to continue with a determinist account of speech in the face of the instinctive grammar of decision-making, would be to propose some variation on the idea that this innate sense of choice about what we say must be “illusory”, or to posit a radical freedom at the point where we distinguish between utterances and their meaning, some kind of indeterminacy of the imagination (such that what we say is inevitable, but we can mean what we like).

This is the position Williams associates with Rorty, who paints a “determinist picture of the actual history of linguistic activity”, but argues that this history is irrelevant to “the history of meaning”.<sup>314</sup> Williams refers here to a thought experiment that Rorty employs in the course of his argument for replacing classical, foundationalist

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

“epistemology” with “hermeneutics” (or, more accurately, Rorty’s argument against replacing epistemologically-centred philosophy with any discipline that seeks to achieve similar results). Epistemology, according to Rorty, aims at the discovery of a neutral framework which would allow us to decide between truth claims. Hermeneutics eschews foundationalist pretensions to knowing the ultimate hinterland behind all such claims, and settles for the more modest goal of conversing between different frameworks in the hope that agreement can be reached.<sup>315</sup> Rorty’s argument is launched via a critique of scientific objectivity, since “the epistemological tradition since Descartes” has grounded its belief in objectivity in the fact that science allows us to attain “accurate representations”.<sup>316</sup> If it can be demonstrated that science, a discipline we understand to be involved with “the discovery of what is really out there in the world”, does not “differ in its patterns of argumentation from discourses for which the notion of ‘correspondence to reality’ seems less appropriate”,<sup>317</sup> then we will be forced to redefine the purview of epistemology and hermeneutics. As such then, Rorty positions himself over-against what Barad might describe as representationalism or a correspondence theory of truth, and a closer study of his thesis, as well as the nature of Williams’s disagreement with Rorty, will be helpful for assessing Williams’s work around the question of representationalism.

Developing the pragmatic logic of Kuhn’s paradigm shift,<sup>318</sup> the upheaval which moves us from one epoch of interpretative history into another, Rorty argues that any assumed distinctions between science and the arts, or fact (as the traditional domain of epistemology) and value (as the traditional domain of hermeneutics), cannot be upheld. These very distinctions are “endangered by novel and substantive suggestions”, just as the assumed domains of science and religion were challenged in the Copernican Revolution. There was no framework by which Galileo could have been judged “scientific” and his religious opponents “unscientific” before Galileo’s findings led to a slow revolution in attitudes to both the scope of Scripture and to our understandings of what being

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<sup>315</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 315-321.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 332-3.

<sup>318</sup> The emphasis here on the word “pragmatic” bears in mind Rorty’s criticism of the echoes of idealism in Kuhn’s theory (his tacit acceptance of aspects of the tradition which separates spirit and nature), exemplified in Kuhn’s description of people working within different paradigms as “living in different worlds.” Rorty believes it should have been enough for Kuhn merely to say “the ‘neutral observational language’ in which proponents of different theories can offer evidence is of little help in deciding between the theories.” See Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 324. The reasons for Rorty’s anti-idealism will become clear in the discussion which follows.

“scientific” meant. If we accept that no discipline can predict where the lines between fact and value will be drawn in the future – or, as Kuhn might put it, if we accept that “no algorithm for theory choice is available” –<sup>319</sup> then philosophy must dispense with the idea that science provides a closer representation of, or closer correspondence to, what is “out there” than disciplines like history or ethics.<sup>320</sup>

For Rorty, science functions in more or less the same way as these other discourses, which is to say that only one important distinction is operative across all disciplines. This is the distinction between “normal” discourse (“commensurable” discourse in which problems can be solved and positions extended or strengthened against the background of consensus) and “abnormal” discourse (discourse which is “incommensurable” because it does not obey current conventions). Philosophers should learn to use the terms “epistemology” and “hermeneutics” in ways that reflect *only* the fundamental difference between what is familiar and what is not. They will be “epistemological” in their approach, seeking to build upon or codify or extend positions, when the terms of the discussion are known.<sup>321</sup> “Hermeneutics” will describe their agnosticism as they seek to understand or grasp discourse which is as yet unfamiliar, on its own terms.<sup>322</sup> Neither form of discourse should be seen a degenerate form of the other, because the “product of abnormal discourse can be anything from nonsense to intellectual revolution”.<sup>323</sup>

Rorty anticipates, just as Kuhn did, the accusation that this schema amounts to a regress into “subjectivism”, and he labours to address this attitude by raising questions about the senses we apply to the objective-subjective dichotomy. Rorty writes that “objectivity” has associations with what can be universally agreed upon, and with what can be shown to have undeniable links with reality “out there”. These meanings have been run together in such a way that we think agreement indicates links to external reality, and disagreement arises where we merely refer to internal states of affairs. Reading Kuhn, we then fear that having “no algorithm” for agreement forces us into an irrational position where truth is a matter of “taste”.<sup>324</sup> If we aligned objectivity with “normal”, consensus-based speech, and subjectivity with “abnormal” speech, and if we

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 325.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid., 320.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid., 333-7

dispensed with the association of these categories with their supposed alignment with external and internal states, we would be free from the anxiety that the absence of an algorithm entails a “reduction” of our world to what is “spiritual” rather than “natural”, or “constructed” rather than “found” (as if access to reality “out there” has been or will ever be possible).<sup>325</sup>

Rorty presses these points in a discussion of spirit-nature dualism, determinism and freedom, and it is here that Williams identifies problems. In the background of criticisms of Kuhn lie a set of assumptions about the spirit and nature, the inheritance (according to Rorty) of German idealism, which associated the spirit with the mind’s “constituting” faculties. With this idea of the spirit in mind, critics imagine doing philosophy or science as hermeneutics entails “constituting” the reality we study rather than “discovering” it. Rorty is ambivalent about both the language of making and the language of finding, believing nothing metaphysical turns on our choice: in no sense do we “make” the physical stuff around us,<sup>326</sup> and (as the Copernican revolution tells us) in no sense do we really “find” it either.<sup>327</sup> It might be easier, he concedes, to stick to the language of “finding” when we talk about physics, but this will be just a matter of good story-telling (it is easier to tell stories of historic change against the backdrop of an unchanging physical universe).<sup>328</sup> The point is, the language of “making” and “finding”, however it is used, should not be conflated with “the line between incommensurability and commensurability”,<sup>329</sup> which is the only distinction with any efficacy, and which is pragmatic rather than ontological in nature.

Where the supposed “making” or “finding” faculties of the self are taken out of the equation, there might be a limited sense in which other insights related to the traditional distinction between the spirit and nature might be affirmed. The impulse behind spirit-nature dualism is the instinctive sense that humans enjoy a kind of freedom from physical determinism.<sup>330</sup> Rorty contends that if we draw the hermeneutics-epistemology distinction where he proposes, between abnormal and normal discourse, we can affirm this sensibility without assuming it has metaphysical guarantees. The denial of the availability of a “permanent neutral matrix” for translating between discourses can be

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid., 342.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid., 345.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 345.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 355.

“generalized to the claim that we should not assume the vocabulary used so far will work on everything else that turns up.”<sup>331</sup> This guarantees a kind of freedom, and Rorty grants this in a provocative illustration. “Physicalism is probably right in saying that we shall someday be able, ‘in principle’ to predict every movement of a person’s body (including those of his larynx and his writing hand)”, however

even if we could predict the sounds made by the community of scientific inquirers of the year 4000, we should not yet be in a position to join in their conversation...the necessary and sufficient microstructural conditions for the production of noise will rarely be paralleled by a material equivalence between a statement in the language used for describing the microstructure and the statement expressed by the noise.<sup>332</sup>

Essentially then, Rorty defines the “spirit” as that which is culturally obscure or as-yet-untranslatable, and therefore free by nature of its capacity to transcend explanation.<sup>333</sup> But the position he assumes in the course of replacing all dichotomies with his normal-abnormal matrix can be summed up as follows. Rorty accepts a thick *causal* connection between human language and the material world, but insists that this is the only kind of connection we can speak of. There is no correspondence or interaction between the history of meaning and the history of matter.

But any account which (like Rorty’s) attempts to hold together a determinist description of utterance with a radically voluntarist description of meaning will collapse, Williams argues, for a number of reasons. The moral implications are worrisome. If nothing significant turns on the words we use to tell our story, our language of “deciding” or “inventing” (the kinds of terms we use to distinguish between actions that we own, and actions we have taken under compulsion) becomes an optional surface discourse, irrelevant to “the real analysis, which is always about neurones”.<sup>334</sup> If this were the case there would be little reason to take one another’s moral reasoning seriously, and Williams thus questions how “the liberal polity and culture Rorty commends” could be “rationally derived from his basic position”.<sup>335</sup> Rorty also tries to factor voluntarism into a scheme which cannot ultimately accommodate it. If our speech is determinate, our “representation to ourselves of what we say” must “also be determinate – otherwise we have simply

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid., 351.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 354-5.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid., 352-3.

<sup>334</sup> Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 38-9.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 38.

introduced into the material system a set of uncaused phenomena”.<sup>336</sup> There is no “soft” physicalist determinism; our sense of liberty to mean will eventually be consumed by the determinist explanation.<sup>337</sup>

And there are other problems too, related to two features of human experience. First, we appear to materially affect our environment and circumstances by what we say. If the newsagent hands me the newspaper I ask for, we cannot say his actions would have been the same if I had not asked, nor can we say my request caused him to hand the paper to me unless we are prepared to allow a “culturally mediated element to enter in” (the newsagent responds to what he takes to be my meaning), in which case we disrupt the closed-circuit system of physical causality with something like a history of meaning.<sup>338</sup> Second, the idea that we can “mean what we like” does not fit with the ways in which a cluster of everyday habits of speech seem to indicate that language operates within a kind of constrained freedom. We appear to be embroiled in a restless struggle “to make what we say both recognisable and defensible”.<sup>339</sup> We use our speech to establish trust between speakers, and to establish joint trust in our environment as a basis for shared action.<sup>340</sup> Faced with these challenges, we fear we represent states of affairs inadequately, and employ different approaches to improve on what has gone before. We test the bounds of what can be said to establish the limits of recognition. Our language, in other words, appears responsive to “pressure that is not simply generated by the speaker’s conscious agenda”,<sup>341</sup> and what is more, it appears to be capable of responding to this pressure by calling on a number of resources at its disposal. This family of observations could be roughly categorised under two headings: language’s manifestation of *complexity*, and language’s manifestation of *difficulty*. The two are intimately related, with the diversity of the tools we employ to communicate being indicative of the difficulty of that task, and many habits of our language use tell us a great deal about both aspects.

For Williams, the complexity of language is manifest where we “notice the interplay” between two “registers” that are present in our everyday speech: *description* and *representation*.<sup>342</sup> Description is defined by Williams as “a mapping exercise in

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid., 43-4.

which we assume the task is to produce a certain traceable structural parallel between what we say and what we perceive”,<sup>343</sup> it is language which aims at prediction and control. Representation is “a way of speaking that may variously be said to seek to embody, translate, make present or reform what is perceived”,<sup>344</sup> it is “schematic”, seeking to articulate something like the context for the objects of our perception, or their interrelation.<sup>345</sup> Close attention to the day to day habits of speech, according to Williams, reveals that our language moves constantly between one strategy and the other, never settling with the activity of simply “registering” or “mapping”,<sup>346</sup> but also “playing away from home” to enlarge its understanding of, or to engage somehow with, what is characteristic or coherent in the life of what is perceived, its interweaving with other lives.<sup>347</sup> A series of statuettes fashioned by Ice Age cave-dwellers which were exhibited in the British Museum in 2013 – lions with part-human and part-leonine bodies – present the two registers poignantly, and attest that our early ancestors were taken up with the task of metaphorization in much the same ways as we are. The perceived form of a man and the perceived form of a lion (literal descriptions), are disaggregated and reformed, so that the resulting figures look like nothing which really exists, but the arrangement allows each form to “speak of” the other.<sup>348</sup> “Human identity as a vehicle of leonine, leonine identity as a vehicle for human”: the two identities are “grasped schematically”, the artist modelling “more than what is ‘directly’ perceived” in order to creatively evoke something elusive about an object’s sensed nature (that men are powerful, perhaps, or that lions have a kind of dignity).<sup>349</sup> “Our speech,” Williams writes “declares its distance from simple reproductive listing: what we can say is more than what we might be obliged to say in creating a formal picture of a set of elements.”<sup>350</sup>

As indicated in our introduction, there will be cause to spend more time examining the relationship between these registers in the course of later discussion, but for now it must suffice to note that the difference between them is not between a foundational level of speech (description) on which various forms of representation

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid., 23-4.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid., 22; 43.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 43.

(metaphor or other more schematic forms of speech) builds.<sup>351</sup> Actually we will soon explore how the distinction between description and representation is not at all clear cut,<sup>352</sup> which is a point that Williams wholeheartedly acknowledges. In asking us to notice the interplay of registers, he is asking us simply to notice a fairly practical difference between two ways of speaking we routinely employ, and to think about when and why we employ them. We can all grant there is a mode of speech that “does not expect or routinely seem to require much in the way of schematic or representational treatment” because for “practical purposes we know pretty much what it means and how to deploy it; its metaphors are buried”.<sup>353</sup> Williams asserts as an example that it is more or less obvious that to “speak of the hands of a clock causes no ripple on the surface of routine communication.”<sup>354</sup> But we also seem continually engaged in the practice of pushing speech beyond this language that we habitually take for granted. Eccentric and adventurous forms of speech are pervasive, and there is an ongoing practice within communication between people of reformulating and testing schemata, finding new metaphors. To identify the points where this mode of speech comes in is to be confronted with the question of why language appears to want to do more, or appears to require more, than the use of a “basic” or familiar set of descriptive terms. And this is to begin to identify something of the unstable connection of language with what it refers to, and so ultimately its riskiness or difficulty.

To draw these connections out, another way to appreciate the complexity in language is by focusing on questions around “falsity”. Once we have noticed the creative capacity inherent in the “lion-man” example – our ability to reproduce and then disaggregate, to “reorder what is given” –<sup>355</sup> we arrive at the observation that language is capable of the counterfactual, and we are simultaneously confronted with the possibility that speakers can use their ability to move away from the reproduction of strict likeness both to conceal and also to make manifest. By thinking through the question of when we consider the utterance of falsehood to be morally problematic, we come to see that falsity

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<sup>351</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>352</sup> Our discussion on McGilchrist will conclude that description has its roots in metaphor, however these metaphors are no longer disruptive because they are unfamiliar. Williams sees description in this way, see *ibid.*, 23, 30.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 45.

actually “stands at the heart of speech” as a creative agent.<sup>356</sup> The ability to think and speak hypothetically (to think of what is not, but could be, the case) is essential to our ability to imagine possible future actions, for example, and we do not commonly think of this capacity for the non-literal as untruthful or morally objectionable.<sup>357</sup> And then, questions of when we *do* think of conscious deception as morally objectionable are themselves complex. Williams gives the example of Augustine’s prohibition against lying, which would have Augustine denying the permissibility of conscious deception even in the proverbial case of a person asked by the Gestapo to reveal the location of a Jewish family. Williams invites us to probe whether “truthfulness” in such cases (where, for example, we sense that a world of greater justice, or human dignity, is at stake) requires more than a simple manifestation of “facts”. He concludes that

it is a more complicated question than it seems to ask what it is that creates and maintains *trust* in the exchange of language: the obvious answer (telling the truth) is not quite enough. Someone who was known to tell the truth unfailingly in situations like the Jewish family in the basement case would not necessarily invite trust...<sup>358</sup>

These kinds of casuistic examples highlight the ways in which (what a rigorously literal interpretation might regard as) “falsehoods” might be fundamental rather than aberrant, even within speech we intuitively regard as adequately representing a state of affairs. “We cannot easily imagine human speaking...without the possibility of fiction”, Williams writes.<sup>359</sup> And where this is true a picture emerges in which “truth” appears to be bound up, not with some kind of straightforward articulation of atomised facts, but with issues of recognition and trust, the interpersonal making of sense through a hazardous process of offering up new schemata to be tested by others.<sup>360</sup>

And this is where difficulty comes in. Pay attention to any “serious personal exchange”, Williams writes, and we will find moments “when we struggle for words; when emotion of one kind or another leaves us baffled and inarticulate; when we cannot without a sense of dishonesty reproduce what we have said or heard in other

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid., 45-52.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 44.

circumstances apparently similar.”<sup>361</sup> We do not have to go far to observe the refusal, within everyday interactions, to tie things up in words too glibly: Cordelia’s inability to describe her love for King Lear is “painfully recognizable”, writes Williams,<sup>362</sup> and the purposeful pressure that we apply to speech in various situations (the way poets impose the “requirements of metre or rhyme or metaphorical patterning” on language in order to generate new and unexpected connections between things) is for Williams an “extrapolation” of the same hesitation that Cordelia expresses, the sense that some situations are beyond expression in familiar terms.<sup>363</sup> Yet the connections we make under this pressure can “fail to be credible, leave out certain criteria for recognisability, override what is given and so on,” writes Williams. Hesitation, and the intentionality within speech that it discloses, shows us that the use of language is always bound up with risk: “We cannot say in advance just how diverse may be the range of possible and recognisable schemata. We can only try it, and see where we fail to persuade some other speaker or perceiver of the recognisability of our version.”<sup>364</sup>

Looking at a number of issues related to language and time gives us further insight into difficulty, risk and recognition. Put in its most simple formulation, Williams asks us to notice that language is an unfinishable business. Despite our use of the phrase, language never behaves as if there are “last words”:<sup>365</sup> we never reach a point of universal agreement where we cease to “go on” from what has just been said. While we are used to reaching levels of reasonable convergence in conversation, so that we acknowledge moments of “meaning the same thing”, such convergence is, according to Williams “not guaranteed, never complete and always suggesting new possibilities of *divergence*.”<sup>366</sup> What is said offers itself as material to be enlarged upon, and two key features of our day-to-day interaction highlight this phenomenon. If I repeat the thing you have just said (in Williams’s example, “There’s a mouse in the kitchen”) it is unlikely that I mean exactly the same thing as you do, in fact it is most likely that I mean something different. I might be responding to your statement with surprise, or asking for confirmation of what you have just said (“There’s a mouse in the *kitchen*?”; “There’s a *mouse* in the kitchen?”). We also take it for granted that “understanding” has to do with knowing how to go on from

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<sup>361</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 57, 132.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid., 67.

what has just been said, quite the opposite of direct repetition.<sup>367</sup> Children in the early stages of linguistic development may repeat adult phrases, but we do not consider them to have grasped fully what their words mean until they can use them appropriately within new formulations, rather than simply parroting. And if we experience a disjunction in conversation with another speaker, an inappropriate response to what we have just said, we know our meaning has not been understood. In these ways speakers behave as if, far from “being a matter of gaining insight into a timeless mental content ‘behind’ or ‘within’ what is said”,<sup>368</sup> as if words were “fixed tokens of the distinct objects they referred to”,<sup>369</sup> language is an ongoing and communal project. It moves in time, so that, in order make themselves intelligible, every speaker must reckon not only with the environment as they perceive it, but with what has already been said about it.<sup>370</sup> And every speaker through the venture of speaking in turn leaves themselves open to agreement, divergence, challenge, or disagreement. To “make sense” is to “make the noise or gesture that will prompt sufficient and appropriate acknowledgement on the part of another – an acknowledgement from an earlier noise-maker that we have heard correctly or an acknowledgement on the part of another noise-maker that *I* have been correctly heard.”<sup>371</sup> To speak is thus to stake a position that will not be “self-contained or self-justifying”.<sup>372</sup>

Where do these linguistic behaviours leave us with regard to Rorty and the freedom of language? For Williams, the difficulty of language will not permit an explanation in which meaning what we please could be “a constitutive strategy” of our speech.<sup>373</sup> The signs of a struggle within language – the fact that it is downright hard “to know how to make the sort of noise/gesture that will secure recognition and the continuation of practice” – are indicative of certain constraints within which language operates, constraints which a Rortian-type scheme, in which the history of meaning and the history of matter stand in strict separation, cannot account for.<sup>374</sup> As Williams writes, difficulty could only mean “that our speech is ‘engaged’, that it is not without relation to what is given.”<sup>375</sup> And this givenness, though initially “a matter of what is said or spoken

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

by another”, must also (if we are to take the search for recognition into account) include “a point between or beyond speakers, a point to which both are gesturing.”<sup>376</sup> But if this is to dismiss Rorty’s radical voluntarism, Williams’s description of language’s complexity and difficulty simultaneously points to a certain kind of freedom within language, which tells strongly against the deterministic materialism that Rorty also takes for granted. If language were a matter of cause and effect, we might expect events and utterances to follow a dyadic or predictable patterning. The fact that language is in search of ever more complex formulations, the fact that many situations leave us struggling to find any words at all, and the fact that the course of time appears to matter in language so that two people uttering the same sentence is no guarantee that they mean the same thing, all suggest that the connection of language to what it refers to must be fundamentally unstable.

But of major interest for us is the way in which this latter rebuttal of a dyadic relation between language and the environment entails a rejection of Cartesianism (or representationalism) just as much as it entails a rejection of deterministic materialism. The features of language Williams points to are as impossible to explain within a metaphysic which understands words as neatly correlated or transparent to the world of “things out there”, as they are by a metaphysic which understands words as predictable indexical symptoms of energy exchange,<sup>377</sup> and Williams appears more than comfortable directing his criticisms in both of these directions. Williams notes that the “salience of Rorty’s picture” lies in his intuition that “what we say is not actually dictated by what is simply there”,<sup>378</sup> and here he appears not only to affirm but to take up something of Rorty’s deep challenge to the idea that language stands in a relation of stable correspondence to what it describes. Williams’s argument with Rorty is not then with Rorty’s anti-representationalism, but with his solution to the problems which that ontology poses. Significantly (though it is couched in a footnote) Williams’s riposte to Rorty includes a criticism of the latter’s apparent assumption that “a Cartesian dualism of parallel kinds of substance is the only *ontological* alternative to physicalism.”<sup>379</sup> Williams’s implication here is that both alternatives are problematic, and he appears in no way ready to concede that a choice against physicalism commits anybody to ontological

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

<sup>377</sup> The language of dyadic versus triangulated relations between symbol and the represented is borrowed from Williams’s discussion of Walker Percy, see *ibid.*, 52-59.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

dualism, or vice versa. Perhaps (and this is where resonances with Barad's critique of post-structuralism suggest themselves most strongly) there is an insinuation here that Rorty's mistake is in his yielding too much to one side of a Cartesian dichotomy that he fails to properly go beyond.

Thus Williams's differences with Rorty take us far enough to identify two poles between which Williams intends to navigate (physicalism and representationalism), and to consider a number of features of language that he commits to in the process of demarcating this middle ground. But what account of language can be given which succeeds in holding together both freedom and difficulty, both instability and engagement? And what account of the relationship between language and what it represents can we give, once we have problematized both the "cause and effect" relationship, and the idea of fixed signs neatly corresponding to items in an environment?

One way of beginning, in line with the language Williams uses as he starts to build his picture of what speech is and does, is to ask what kind of analysis we might submit language to, if not the dyadic analysis appropriate to physical transactions or exchanges of energy within an environment? Williams follows the American novelist Walker Percy in inviting us to consider a difference between indexes and symbols within speech. If a person with toothache groans we might consider this as an index, a wired-in response: "if smoke, then fire".<sup>380</sup> But if a second person says "Ouch!" and third says "My tooth hurts", two varieties of learned response, these need "something more than an energy exchange model" to account for them, since they involve the application of a set of symbols (words) to a perceived state of affairs. As soon as we are talking about symbolization, we are talking about the attempt to speak of one thing through something not naturally or obviously "like" it. But symbols work by being transformed by this process, "a word takes on the 'feel', the associations of what it points to".<sup>381</sup> Human utterance proceeds in the confidence that noises bearing no obvious relation to what they represent can yet "hold" something of our experience within a different medium.<sup>382</sup> We must then submit language to triadic rather than just dyadic analysis; language involves

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<sup>380</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

triangulations between the language user, object, and symbol.<sup>383</sup> Another way of expressing this for Williams is to say that

An utterance in a natural language establishes a *world*, which is importantly different...from an ‘environment’; a world is a scheme of sentences proposing a coherent set of relations, which may be actual or fictive...Which of these it is will be settled by a complex process taking place in a community of speakers.<sup>384</sup>

To name what we encounter by applying a symbol to it is to shift that thing from environment to world, to “pair the apprehended thing with another thing, a cluster of sounds that may have other pairings and resonances”.<sup>385</sup> That we are continually involved in this world-making process, this exploration of possible resonances in the company of others, is in one way most easily identifiable when we notice “mistakes” or “accidents” within speech. Percy gives the example of the mishearing of one half of a metaphor: in the American South the “blue darter hawk” has come to be colloquially referred to as a “blue-dollar hawk”, a new pairing which “presents the hawk as dense with significance, as puzzling or inviting”.<sup>386</sup> “Mistakes” like this, disruptions of a “plainly descriptive” level of speech (the original term “blue darter” aims more straightforwardly to name the bird’s activity), pairings that present themselves as impenetrable or eventually unconvincing to us, can alert us to what speakers seem to be incessantly in the process of doing: inviting each other to see one thing through another, a communal search for “new connections” that might – if they “make sense” to others – bring newly apprehended aspects of our environment to light.<sup>387</sup>

This account of language as triadic rather than dyadic has a number of merits with regard to some of the themes we have explored so far. It makes sense of our experiential awareness that language can “stand apart from the causal nexus”, and the surprising insight that some of the central practices of human speaking appear to involve a deliberate “cutting of links” with the environment: we invent what does not exist both to conceal things from sight and to allow “diverse aspects of what we encounter to emerge into view.”<sup>388</sup> In acknowledging this “standing apart” Williams’s account also answers for the

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<sup>383</sup> Ibid.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>385</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid., 61.

restlessness that language exhibits. Our sense that language involves choice comes tied up with the intuition that it demands care. Our linguistic “worlds” never finally or completely seem to encompass the full texture of what is given to perception, and our language is continually moved forward under the pressure of this awareness to say more or to say better, it “moves into its subject over time”.<sup>389</sup> Finally, and on the subject of time, in presenting language as relating to what is not language in “a shifting pattern of correlation” rather than an “index-like relation of cause and effect” (in presenting language as engaging with but not mapped neatly onto the environment it represents)<sup>390</sup> Williams’s account helps in understanding why two identical sentences can mean such different things, why what has just been said matters. As Williams writes, quoting Percy, “the sentence ‘I need you’ can provoke a very wide range of responses depending on the ‘world’ in which it occurs. And...the same words may be spoken as literal, as metaphor, as trite metaphor, as significant or banal”.<sup>391</sup> To sum up some of these observations, Williams’s picture allows for the freedom of language, but not at the cost of denying a kind of connectivity between what we say, and what we say it about. The connection he posits, which is neither a matter of “causation” nor a matter of direct “correspondence”, is also neither timeless nor guaranteed, but is always vulnerable, always incomplete. Language “creates a world, and so entails a constant losing and rediscovering of what is encountered.”<sup>392</sup>

But we can go no further without acknowledging certain ways in which Williams’s anti-Cartesianism, signposted both in his introduction, and manifest in his reaction to Rorty, seems somewhat under strain with his employment of Percy’s world versus environment model, and with a number of features of the argument Williams builds in working up to it. Arguably, Williams’s articulation of the complexity of language is responsible for generating some of the pressure here (though, as we will spend the next section of our chapter exploring, it is just this aspect of his work that on closer examination allows us to resolve some of these tensions and to address possible misreadings). We noted at the outset that Williams’s use of the term “representation” as a way of identifying certain kinds of speech apart from description is, at least at a superficial level, problematic because of its associations with the concept of a mentally

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<sup>389</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 60.

reproduced virtual version of the thing represented. Another layer of complication is added where Williams's distinction between description and representation seems to come close to designating *description* as a kind of reproduction in precisely the sense we just considered (reproduction of a virtual version), with representation as a mode of speech which then disaggregates and reformulates the more straightforward picture that description gives us. The "lion-man" example, though useful in highlighting both registers at work in quite a primitive form of communication, does carry something of this implication when it comes to description. The possible inference that metaphorical speech builds on the more foundational category of literal description (as if description was a primary mode of speech more apt at mirroring our environment), is explicitly resisted on more than one occasion, and actually Williams ends an early summary of his thesis with the claim that all of the features of language that he identifies in his book "carry a challenge to the idea that there is a 'primitive' literal level in our speech on whose foundation metaphor and symbol are built up."<sup>393</sup> Williams thereafter consistently distances himself from this reading by qualifying or scare quoting many instances of his use of terms like "literal" (referring, for example to "(what is imagined to be) literal description").<sup>394</sup> But readers can be forgiven for retaining some confusion on this point. That Williams frequently contrasts description and representation in terms of language that is more straightforward versus language that is more risky (involved in making fresh connections between objects not obviously related),<sup>395</sup> and that he designates schematic representation as a "more complex" mode of speech,<sup>396</sup> means that a clarification of these terms and their relationship is essential to the task of demonstrating how Williams's philosophy diverges from the representationalist model he is at some points more explicitly bent on dismantling.

Finally, Percy's image of language creating a world as opposed to an environment, where a world entails triadic relations, and dyadic relations pertain to an environment,<sup>397</sup> on first appearances seems to promote the age-old characterisation of matter with what is passive and language as what is active or dynamic. Percy's breakdown of triadic relations – as relations between subject, object, and symbol – does

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<sup>393</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., Chapters 1 and 2, *passim*.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid., 52-3.

not help much in avoiding these overtones.<sup>398</sup> Thus by the time Williams's argument for the freedom of language has been presented, there is still a sense of ambiguity around the question of what it is that language actually represents. And a great deal hangs on this question, remembering that the assumption that we can posit a reality beyond language, a world of objects with (as Barad might put it) fixed independent properties, is basic to classical Cartesian approaches to epistemology.

Williams's clear discomfort, throughout his argument for language's freedom, around which terms to employ when naming speech's referent, and his constant need to clarify what he is "not saying" in order to pre-empt certain readings, are revealing. On one hand these things confirm his cognisance of how easy it can be to smuggle in Cartesian assumptions through the language we use, and this is encouraging in terms of our argument for Williams's anti-Cartesianism. On the other hand, there is a certain caginess here, a concession that his case for a non-dichotomous ontology (so boldly signalled in his introductory proposition that "matter and meaning do not necessarily belong in different universes")<sup>399</sup> has not necessarily been made in the course of his discussion for language's freedom. The shared reference point between speakers which is presupposed by speech's difficulty is variously referred to by Williams as "what is perceived", "what is spoken of", "the environment", "what language engages with", and "what is given",<sup>400</sup> and his concern to avoid what he regards as more loaded terminology on these occasions is summarised when he asks us to notice that

I am not talking about the relation of 'language' with 'the world': once again this begs a question, assuming that there is somewhere a straightforward catalogue of neutral phenomena to be isolated as what is basically *there*, and that anything else is what we choose to say, or at best what we vaguely and intuitively decide to add to the iron rations of description.<sup>401</sup>

Reiterating the same thing at a slightly later point in his discussion, he writes

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<sup>398</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid., 20, 22; 21; 23, 30; 44, 26.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 44.

I am once again – rather obviously – trying to avoid speaking of a ‘world’ beyond language, if only to avoid a not very helpful word/world dualism which encourages us to think of language as the labelling of a passive environment.<sup>402</sup>

On this latter occasion, however, Williams goes on to maintain that what he has argued up to this point (his case for the freedom of language on the basis of language’s complexity and difficulty) should already demonstrate why he might be “unhappy with this”, and that his argument about language and the body “will spell this out further.”<sup>403</sup> These comments direct us towards a helpful process for working through some of the problems we have just raised. They are Williams’s indication that understanding what is entailed by the complexity of language, and understanding where embodiment comes in, are the keys to conceiving of matter differently. In what follows, we will look more closely at “representation” and the metaphysics it presupposes in order to show how Williams’s conception of language’s freedom really does begin to evoke the idea of a kind of agentic materiality. From here we will turn to look at the relationship between representation and description as an entry into the question of where the body comes in (with help from Iain McGilchrist, whose influence on these subjects is traceable in Williams’s work), and we will follow how Williams’s treatment of language and embodiment shows the freedom and dynamism of language to be an expression of the intrinsic character of matter itself. We will finish the next section with a comparison between Williams’s ontology and the ontologies offered by Coole and Barad, in order to show some affinities between his thought and the new materialisms.

## **ii) Representation and Description, Recognition and Embodiment: Language as Matter Making Sense**

Percy writes that once we consider “how symbolization actually works” we are faced with the need to consider the question: “how can one thing ‘be’ in another?”<sup>404</sup> In the same way Williams points out that significant metaphysical issues are raised in connection with representation as a mode of speaking clearly removed from the attempt

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<sup>402</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid., 56.

to reproduce or to imitate. Our seemingly instinctive confidence that something unlike its subject matter can nevertheless “speak of” what it is not – the confidence that we manifest in our use of metaphor (where one element becomes a vehicle for the other) and at an even more basic level in our claims to represent the physical environment by means of sound – presupposes “that some level or aspect of what is perceived can come to be in another medium.”<sup>405</sup> For Williams representation thus demands an account of participation, an account of how a characteristic form of something can be recognised and recaptured in another phenomenal shape, or put otherwise “an ‘analogical’ discourse that is able to identify continuity in material distinctness”.<sup>406</sup> For this we will also need to think about “a distinction between intelligible forms of action and the precise embodiments in which they are encountered”,<sup>407</sup> a distinction, he hastens to add, which is not like a doctrine of form and matter in any dualistic sense, but which recognises

that even within a material account of the world, the communicative sense made by this or that object is not another feature of its material composition – as, to use the Wittgensteinian example, the expression (smile or frown) is not a material feature of the face, yet can only be intelligible as the shape of a material face.<sup>408</sup>

Representation and the metaphysics it implies must then entail both a certain anthropology and a certain kind of account of what speech refers to. On one hand humans appear to have the capacity to recognise patterns of intelligible form at work across diverse agents, so that human subjects are “constantly involved in drawing out the life of what is represented by more and more initiatives in ‘reading’ the object through one medium or another.”<sup>409</sup> On the other hand the incessantness of this activity prompts us to consider the environment, not as passive raw material, but as “a complex of actual and potential life, of structures breeding not only complexity but different levels of unity.”<sup>410</sup> It is as if our language is responsive to an entity that is “consistently ‘proposing’ more than any one account of itself will capture”, or which “continues to ‘give itself’ for new kinds of knowing.”<sup>411</sup>

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<sup>405</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid., 24-5.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid.

Williams's concept of representation does then begin to evoke the idea of an agentic materiality, a material world which is "irreducibly charged with intelligibility",<sup>412</sup> or which is innately communicative, embodying messages, so that matter and meaning may not be ontologically distinct. But the radically non-dichotomous nature of the ontology Williams presumes becomes most explicit, not with the idea that our representations pick up on the communicative sense inherent to material forms (although this is certainly part of the picture), but with the idea that the activity of representation itself is a work of the material universe, so that representation is nothing less than matter becoming self-conscious. This latter proposal is not fully exposed in his work until it is argued that our human capacity to recognise sameness-in-difference (the capacity so fundamental both to representation and to the communal process of making sense) is itself inextricably rooted in our embodiment. What makes us capable of recognising and holding one form in another, and of (in this way) establishing a world in common, is our material participation in the environment that we represent.

The deep connection between recognition and embodiment is first presaged in Williams's distinction between representation and description, or at least it can be found in this distinction if we read Williams through McGilchrist's presentation of a set of issues in neuroscience. This is a reading that Williams himself invites, more than once naming McGilchrist's work as important background to his thoughts on language,<sup>413</sup> and tying his own concept of description to McGilchrist's left-brain-associated "referential" language, while he connects his concept of schematic speech (representation) with McGilchrist's right-brain-associated activities.<sup>414</sup> A summary of McGilchrist's work will help us to discern a normative presumption which underlies Williams's account of representation and description, and this will connect Williams's concept of "registers" within language to his understanding of language and the body.

McGilchrist's book *The Master and His Emissary* challenges the conventional view of language as associated with left-brain activity alone, presenting instead the more nuanced understanding now widely accepted amongst neuroscientists that both right-brain

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<sup>412</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., vii, 27.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid., 27, 28.

and left-brain functioning are essential to language, though the hemispheres specialise in different aspects of language use.<sup>415</sup> The left-brain mostly subserves syntax and vocabulary,<sup>416</sup> and has rightly been linked with denotative language (syntactical language, or what Williams calls description),<sup>417</sup> but the right-brain is involved in invoking plural meanings of words, understanding the meaning of whole sentences, their context, tone, use of metaphors, emotional significance, and humour.<sup>418</sup>

To understand the significance of this for McGilchrist (and thus for Williams), it is necessary to say something of McGilchrist's suggestion that the structure of the brain might give us clues as to the structure of the world it mediates and partially creates.<sup>419</sup> In particular, the impact of the human mind in shaping the world that we live in might be understood better if we shifted away from talking about the right- and left-brain in terms of their function, and saw them as something more akin to different personalities, with different drives, and which deliver different "worlds" to us.<sup>420</sup> Brain lateralisation (the division of hemispheres and their specialisation) has evolved from the need to attend to the environment in two different ways. To experience it as unfamiliar and in flux on one hand, in order to give it a full and vigilant attention; on the other hand to "fix it as it flies", that is, to be able to step out of the world of flux and to isolate, focus on, and categorise components (the kind of attention we need to give to the environment in order to learn, predict, and produce).<sup>421</sup> To carry out their different tasks without inhibiting each other, the hemispheres require a certain distance from each other, and each remains largely ignorant of what the other is doing. The "emissary" of McGilchrist's book title is the left-brain, which has been delegated certain tasks by the more diversely skilled right hemisphere on which it depends: tasks related to fixing, holding, categorising, seeing the world in terms of parts, reconstructing a whole from the parts and thus providing

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<sup>415</sup> Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 99.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>417</sup> Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 27. Williams is explicit about the synonymy of McGilchrist's "syntactical" or "denotative" language with his concept of "description".

<sup>418</sup> McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary*, 99.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 28. McGilchrist uses of the terms "world" is problematic given Williams's explicit refusal to use this word to describe what is given to perception, but I have stuck with McGilchrist's nomenclature in order to give a summary that is faithful to his thesis.

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-99.

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31; 37-40.

ourselves with a simplified version or “map” of the world. These skills enable us to deal effectively with the familiar.<sup>422</sup>

McGilchrist believes that the fact the two hemispheres approach the world with certain kinds of attention is of great importance from a phenomenological perspective, given that how we attend to the world “changes *what kind of* a thing comes into being for us.”<sup>423</sup> Broadly, his thesis is that the defining features of our humanity relate to our being able to gain critical distance “from our selves and from the immediacy of experience” because this enables us to take some amount of control of the environment around us rather than “responding to it passively.”<sup>424</sup> However, one “needs to bring what one has learned from one’s ascent back to the world where life is going on”, and to “incorporate it in such a way that it enriches experience”.<sup>425</sup> He therefore believes the worlds that both hemispheres deliver are essential to the human condition, but that there is an ideal movement from experience to abstraction and back to experience (right hemisphere to left hemisphere and back to the right) which gives us optimal distance.<sup>426</sup> This synthesising process is threatened by the fact that the left hemisphere’s specialisation in certainty, fixity, and familiarity, combined with its ignorance of what the right brain is doing, render it remarkably self-assured, competitive, and active in attempting to become a world unto itself. The left hemisphere’s increasing attempts to dominate (which, given the right conditions, it can successfully do) have shaped the history of thought.<sup>427</sup> The impacts of this are felt not least in the prevalence of dichotomous thought after Descartes (which McGilchrist relates to the left hemisphere penchant for reconstructing a whole from its parts).<sup>428</sup>

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<sup>422</sup> Ibid., 6, 14, 30.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid., 21-22, 126.

<sup>427</sup> A summary of the thesis of *The Master and his Emissary* as a whole, but see especially McGilchrist’s use of Nietzsche’s tale of the Master and his Emissary (page 14), as well as Chapters 1 and 2 which discuss the “character” of the left and right hemispheres, and Chapters 6 and 7 which discuss how preferential use of the right or left hemispheres may affect their relationship over time to impact culture.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid., 11. Of interest to our topic is McGilchrist’s reading of rationalism and postmodernism as two sides of the same coin. Scientific materialism, while it views the world as a machine made up of parts in a way we now associate with the world the left-brain delivers, is in denial about language’s ability to obscure experience. Postmodernism presents language as a self-referential and enclosed system of symbols, while it ignores the existence of anything “out there”. See pages 6-7. Resonances with Barad’s understanding of postmodernism as a prisoner of the problematic metaphysic it attempts to counter are clear here in much the same ways as they are clear in Williams.

McGilchrist emphasises the somewhat counterintuitive fact that expansions in the parts of the brain we now associate with language, as well as the advancements in vocal capacity that were needed to produce controlled sounds, predated the development of human language.<sup>429</sup> There is strong evidence to suggest what produced this change in the brain's structure or capacity, creating the "space" that language later co-opted, was a kind of communication involving music allied to gesture.<sup>430</sup> In sub-Saharan Africa tribes still use drum beats to communicate, and, rather than mimicking the sounds of words and verbal phrases, the rhythms mimic the bodily gestures of the communicator, so that the receiving of such signals is accompanied by the visualisation of (and participation in) the communicator's dance, which is where meaning is to be found. This cannot be far from the kind of "I-thou" communication through music that McGilchrist (along with many neuroscientists) believes language grew out of. Before denotative or syntactical language came a form of communication strongly connected to bodily experiences and to emotions, the essence of language's predecessor being a kind of participatory or empathetic imitation of other communicators,<sup>431</sup> such that a person could in a sense "inhabit the body and therefore the emotional world of another".<sup>432</sup>

Though we now use it for communication, it therefore seems that we did not need *denotative* language to communicate or to think, McGilchrist writes.<sup>433</sup> But if denotative language, a later entry in the linguistic development of humans, did not arise from the drive to communicate, why did it arise? His answer is derived in part from referential language's signs of alignment to certain kinds of gestures (to do with pointing, grasping or holding) which suggests that, if the origins of language were indeed in music allied to gesture, the "syntactic elements of language" may have derived from "the more functional, more manipulative" hand movements.<sup>434</sup> This has significant implications, given that touch allows us to derive only a piecemeal image of something, and that grasping "implies seizing a thing for ourselves...wresting it away from its context,

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<sup>429</sup> Though brain asymmetry has certainly been accelerated since humans began to use language, this is an epiphenomenon: language was not the initial driver of brain lateralisation or the asymmetry of brain function. See *ibid.*, 100.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-105; for notes on gesture, 119.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-26.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-110. In fact, in contradiction to body language, denotative language is "the perfect medium for concealing, rather than revealing, meaning" (see page 106).

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

holding it fast, focussing on it.”<sup>435</sup> Denotative language, it seems, may have arisen from the need to expand the “I-it” capacities of language, the need to symbolise elements of the environment in order to make them available to memory.<sup>436</sup> Denotative language allows for greater manipulation and control of the environment because it allows for a less obviously corporeal, more virtual representation of reality (made up of fixed, distinct parts of speech, which help us to carve up, isolate or categorise elements of lived experience). It is in this way characterised by abstraction, a loss of the whole picture in the interests of greater precision and efficiency: it “enables the left hemisphere to represent the world ‘off-line’, a conceptual version, distinct from the world of experience, and shielded from the immediate environment, with its insistent impressions, feelings and demands”.<sup>437</sup>

The fact that only the right hemisphere understands metaphor is a good indication that metaphorical thought and language (what Williams refers to as schematic language or representation, making sense of one thing in terms of another) has stronger connections with a more archaic repertoire than abstract language. McGilchrist writes that a metaphor designates relations between things, thus asserting “a common life that is experienced in the body of the one who makes it”, so that the separation between elements of a metaphor “is only present at the linguistic level.”<sup>438</sup> We often mistakenly think of metaphor as arising from denotative speech, when in fact the matter is the other way around. “Our sense of the commonality of the two ideas, perceptions or entities” McGilchrist writes “does not lie in a *post hoc* derivation of something abstracted from each of them, which is found on subsequent comparison to be similar...but rather on a single concrete, kinaesthetic experience more fundamental than either, and from which they are in turn derived.”<sup>439</sup> A clash of symbols and a clash of colours “are felt in our embodied selves as sharing a common nature.”<sup>440</sup>

McGilchrist argues that the (great) advantages presented to human action and expression in the ability to stand back from the flux of experience by producing distilled or disembodied concepts in language come with potential losses with regard to

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<sup>435</sup> Ibid., 112-113.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid., 113-114.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid.

perception.<sup>441</sup> Referential language would become a world unto itself without a continued backward and forward movement between right and left hemispheres,<sup>442</sup> a synthesising activity which allows metaphorical speech to pervade and disrupt the “self-consistent system of tokens” that the left brain trades in.<sup>443</sup> Our ability to think and speak metaphorically (in a broad, rather than a narrowly literary, sense) means that language can continue to “carry us back to the experiential world” in two ways. At the “bottom” end, and though familiarity can obscure their roots, all words have an original metaphorical lineage related to bodily experience (as McGilchrist points out, the most abstract philosophical terms like “contending”, “intending”, “impression” or “comprehension” have their roots in the Latin verb *tendere*, to grasp).<sup>444</sup> At the “top” end, the host of implicit resonances that we can instantly associate with a single word have the ability to invoke that word’s ultimate context in a world before the separation into parts that language occasions. “The word metaphor implies something that carries you across an implied gap”, McGilchrist writes, and the “gap across which metaphor carries us is one that language itself creates.” In this way, “metaphor is language’s cure for the ills entailed on us by language... If the separation exists at the level of language, it does not at the level of experience.”<sup>445</sup>

We noted that Williams’s (relatively brief) summary of McGilchrist’s work uses the terms description and representation interchangeably with McGilchrist’s categories of denotative and metaphorical speech. But many other instances of Williams’s characterisation of description and representation carry shades of McGilchrist’s theory, and this is significant in helping to address some of the potential tensions we have identified within Williams’s thought. It was, for example, pointed out earlier that Williams’s work treats description as a straightforward depiction of the environment, or as involved in the production of something like a virtual or disembodied map of the environment for the purposes of navigation, and that this could be problematic in terms of our argument for Williams’s anti-representational impulse if this register was interpreted as being (for this reason) foundational. With McGilchrist’s picture in mind we can affirm that these senses of description are indeed present for Williams, but that the usefulness of

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<sup>441</sup> Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 28.

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>443</sup> McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary*, 126.

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*, 116; 112.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

description for prediction and control does not entail a closer correspondence between descriptive language and some imagined world of items making up reality “out there”. Like McGilchrist, Williams associates description with representations that have become over-familiar (Williams’s example of the “hands of the clock” as a metaphor buried within routine description is pertinent here). He also refers to representation as “basic” and “not reducible to the...functional goals of left-brain description”,<sup>446</sup> and several times names description as a sub-category of representation (“some of the mechanisms of metaphor are essential to the meaning of any descriptive language whatever”):<sup>447</sup> here he seems to follow McGilchrist in presenting representational language as the more primitive activity. Description is also consistently related (by both theorists) to the activities of cataloguing or listing, or with the attempt to itemise or carve up the landscape of perception.<sup>448</sup> Crucially, these aspects (for Williams as for McGilchrist) mean that, despite its usefulness in terms of the precision needed for prediction and control, descriptive language constitutes a further removal from (rather than a closer correspondence to) the environment in which experience takes place. Representation, rather than description, is understood to be the linguistic practice with the greater chance of allowing what is given to perception to modify and pervade our speech (though this is acknowledged to be a somewhat “paradoxical” matter in the work of Williams, who proffers the counter-intuitive claim that with representation the “distinctive form” of that which is represented comes more plainly into view, because there is no attempt here to imitate, rather the form is detached from its “original specific embodiment” and linked to another context).<sup>449</sup> Description aims to name, but representation is oriented to “knowing whose point is simply *knowing*, in the sense of intelligently enjoying the presence of the other.”<sup>450</sup> The association of rain and grief in the metaphor “weeping skies” for example, may tell us more about both elements within of the comparison than any description could, because it “points up something about weeping by association with weather, as well as pointing up something about weather by recognizing its irresistible linkage with mood”.<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>446</sup> Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 28-9.

<sup>447</sup> Williams quotes Michael Arbib and Mary Hesse here, see *ibid.*, 23; See also *ibid.*, 189.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, 23, 190.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-2.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

And Williams is not afraid to echo McGilchrist's more startlingly normative formulations in presenting this insight about representation. The concept of an "ideal" movement of language from experience to distillation and back to experience is entertained in Williams's work also, so that representation is in a sense championed as that which allows for a renewed or fresh encounter with what is between or beyond speakers: representation "rebels" against "any attempt to install a tyranny of description",<sup>452</sup> description being the more violent practice.<sup>453</sup> This is the persistent thought behind Williams's chapter on "excessive speech", which makes the argument that extreme speech (as found in poetry, ritual, and narrative: practices which deliberately put our language under pressure) is not an "aberration" within language, but is a common "tool of exploration",<sup>454</sup> which answers to an intuitive sense that over-familiar representations can obscure what is available to perception. "Complicating" our speech deliberately by imposing the need to rhyme or to fit with a syllabic patterning can "uncover what 'normal' perception screens out" because "Finding a rhyme...requires a unique moment of holding an idea in suspense while the writer looks for a way of saying it that will echo specific sounds":<sup>455</sup> unique and surprising connections are thus brought into being through a discipline of forcing familiar rhythms of speech out of shape. Poetry is hard to make head or tail of, apart from something like the understanding of description and representation that McGilchrist and Williams presume (the idea of description as a degree further removed from perception than representation), and Williams asks us to consider why we should "assume that our language can discover anything simply by playing games with itself", unless we are somehow using excessive speech to "converse with ourselves, with our unexamined perceptions, our half-conscious associations of sounds and sense alike".<sup>456</sup> Poetry is an expression of quite a "remarkable act of faith in language, an act of faith which assumes that words can be persuaded to say more than they initially seem to mean":<sup>457</sup> Williams writes that we trust our speech "to deliver us precisely from the traps of speech."<sup>458</sup> This is strongly reminiscent of McGilchrist's idea of metaphor as the remedy for the gap that language itself creates, and this resemblance is hugely significant, given McGilchrist's proposal that the efficacy of metaphor for the

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<sup>452</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid., 130-1.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid., 134; 132.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid., 152.

renewal of language is tied up with its strong connections with the kinaesthetic, where both the creation of and the recognition of metaphor rely on our bodies experiencing multiple sensory perceptions as one event.

Williams alludes to the connection between representation and bodily participation in a number of instances throughout his argument for language's freedom. He assumes, for example, that the limitedness of language, its timefulness and finitude (as displayed in the fact that language is always following on from what has been said, and is always expectant of being followed) should alert us naturally to its inherent materiality.<sup>459</sup> But this identification is shored up finally in a discussion of the phenomenology of perception, which Williams introduces through a description of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and its therapies, observing that breakdowns in the "normal" means by which humans organize their perceptive fields and establish a world in common helps us to identify things that most of us take for granted about how our perception of the world emerges and where language fits in.

ASD patients experience a kind of "system overload" through being exposed to sensory stimulations without the means to select which ones are important. Retreating into a private world by focusing on a single sensory stimulation (for example, banging a hand on a hard surface) is a common strategy for establishing "a controllable level of feedback".<sup>460</sup> Pioneering ASD therapist Phoebe Caldwell works with people experiencing the isolation of over-stimulation with a therapy she calls "Intensive Interaction", a process in which the actions taken in order to control sensory feedback by a person exhibiting distressed behaviour are mimicked by a helper. When the distressed person bangs the table, the helper bangs the arm of a chair. A bridge from isolation and into shared interaction is in this way constructed. The distressed person begins to recognise their own action is being reflected back to them from a source outside of themselves. They repeat their sound in order to prompt another repetition, and a "conversation" is entered into; the person with ASD becomes calmer with the assurance that their action is heard – that it "makes sense" to another – and the interaction can build into more diverse patterns of

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<sup>459</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid., 95.

response.<sup>461</sup> The therapy works because ASD is caused by “an apparent absence” of a normal “process of neural connection”: the ability that prevents most of us from experiencing sensory overload, which is an “ability to see that our patterns of activity (including noise-making) are reflected elsewhere in the sensory world”, is disrupted. In most people’s mental function, the “same neural connection happens both when I do something and when I perceive it done” even if it is done “in a different mode or medium”. But for the sufferer of ASD, only imitations of their own immediate or familiar behaviour will produce recognition and response. Thus a therapist working with a person with ASD must first establish the means by which that person is talking to him or herself, before they can start to “converse” with that person.<sup>462</sup>

Williams’s foray into the subject of Intensive Interaction therapy is intended to highlight something about the origins of linguistic communication, and about the close connection between language and the development of “a coherent model of the physical world”.<sup>463</sup> ASD tells us that

our communicative activity normally selects and organizes stimuli and, when overloaded, narrows and focuses that activity in self-defensive ways; and further, this communicative activity also normally functions by a process of reinforcing...its own workings in relation to the reflections it perceives in others. A potentially overwhelming environment is made manageable through these two strategies.<sup>464</sup>

This implies that complex physical and relational processes are at work in my acquisition of a world that I can navigate and to some extent control. “Objects” come to be, not through the “presentation of a set of material stimuli to an individual brain”, but through a number of inseparably interwoven strategies. My physical development involves accumulating experiences in which I meet with physical resistance from points in my environment, such that I begin to create “an internalized map and set of rules encoding [it]”, but this happens in “tandem” with the reception of “confirmatory or non-

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<sup>461</sup> Ibid., 95-6; A number of videos of Phoebe Caldwell demonstrating Intensive Interaction have been published on youtube which illustrate how this kind of communication acts as a bridge into social interaction for the ASD sufferer, see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OhnaPJw\\_Wh8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OhnaPJw_Wh8), last accessed 4/08/16.

<sup>462</sup> Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 96.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid., 97.

confirmatory material from other agents whose visible strategies for managing the environment resemble mine.”<sup>465</sup> It is the “convergence of different possible points of view and points where resistance is met” which allows me to experience *depth*, for example, so that I can experience the world as three-dimensional, and my idea of an object’s “continuity over time” is provided by the same apprehension of different possible perspectives. It is in seeing and being able to recognise my own behaviour – my own responses to points of resistance, my own growing apprehension of depth – reflected in the modulation of other bodies in response to the environment as they experience it that allows me to obtain “a map of my environment in which I can locate myself in relation to other physical presences” and to recognize “something of the paradoxical character of my own physical presence, which I perceive in a unique way.”<sup>466</sup> Language, against this backdrop, and when we see its birth in the “conversational” techniques taught by Caldwell, can only be seen as a practice, a *certain kind* of modulation of the body which, in continuity with other gestural communication, “establishes a situation” or “a world in common”.<sup>467</sup>

The invitation to see language as an extension of gesture is important for a number of reasons. For Williams, it helps us definitively to move away from any model which presents language as “a tool for getting information from one container to the other” (as representationalism presents it).<sup>468</sup> Williams’s account, which has a clear and acknowledged debt to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, resonates with the latter’s idea of sentience as belonging to the body by nature of the fact that the body’s extension into the lifeworld (its intentionality) is the basis for perception.<sup>469</sup> And when Williams names language as an activity of reinforcing our perception through recognition of the behaviours of other intelligent or intentional bodies, we also find him making a connection that both Merleau-Ponty and McGilchrist make: the idea of language as tied up with empathy or mimesis, the ability to understand or to recognise an action done because of an ability to relate – as a body – to another’s bodily style. We saw this in McGilchrist’s example of the proto-language of drum beats allied to dance in sub-Saharan Africa, but Merleau-Ponty usefully summarizes the concept when he says that

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<sup>465</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid., 98-9.

Communicating or the understanding of gestures is achieved through the reciprocity between my intentions and the other person's gestures, and between my gestures and the intentions which can be read in the other person's behaviour. Everything happens as if the other person's intention inhabited my body, or as if my intentions inhabited his body. The gesture I witness sketches out the first signs of an intentional object. This object becomes present and fully understood when the powers of my body adjust to it and fit over it.<sup>470</sup>

The point is that speech, if we see its connections with gesture, is not an "envelope or clothing for thought" which works by "arousing 'representations' in me" (as Merleau-Ponty puts it),<sup>471</sup> and words are not "objects designed somehow to depict other objects" as Williams paraphrases him.<sup>472</sup> This would be to assume a problem exists in which my interior self stands in separation from external reality, and that the two need to be somehow connected. It assumes "that we are the recipients of individualized sets of material stimuli which we then translate into expression or communication, offering them somewhat tentatively to other speakers, never sure that their individual set of stimuli corresponds to ours."<sup>473</sup> With gestural expression it is easier to see the problem with such a conceptualisation: if a friend points out a church spire to me, their finger "is not a finger-for-me that I *think of* as orientated towards a church tower-for-me" but rather it is their finger "which itself shows me the tower."<sup>474</sup> Gestures do not therefore aim to produce mental images for us "in virtue of some pre-established harmony":<sup>475</sup> they bear their own sense with them. And so it is with language. Seeing and speaking are both "practices in which I take a particular place in a flow of activity that embraces both me and my neighbour" so that to express something in words is to "seek a mode of action that moves with the perceived environment, seeks to continue the 'style' of action or energy that it reflects or represents".<sup>476</sup> We can think of speech as carrying information, but just like the gesture of pointing, the information carried in speech is inseparable from the material act itself. Words embody the things they represent: they are the presence of what is represented for the speaking or hearing subject.<sup>477</sup>

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<sup>470</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 190-1.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>472</sup> Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 99.

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*, 111, citing Merleau-Ponty.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

The radical implications of the inseparability of physical, cognitive, and relational processes involved in perceiving and speaking, and the inextricability of recognition with a kind of bodily empathy (the ability to take up an invitation that inheres in words themselves, an invitation to empathetically inhabit the speaker's world) are followed through in Williams's work. Together these things entail that language is not just a "physical" act in the most obvious sense of involving the use of our vocal chords, but it is material in the more radical sense of flowing out of the embeddedness of our bodies in the world. Williams states that, as consequence

one of the myths we need to be most wary of is the habit of opposing purely active subject to passive object, of referring to an active mind's perception of mindless and passive process as the basic paradigm of knowledge.<sup>478</sup>

Not only does language enlarge the possibilities of the material world (human culture has so often been celebrated for this reason), but language is a situation for the material world's *own* enlargement, because as the phenomenology of language shows us, the speaker does not just exert control over matter, but matter exerts a kind of agency over the speaker. Williams makes this point unambiguously in a clarification of what it means for words to carry their own meaning (or to be the presence of what they refer to for the hearing subject), where he differentiates this position from "magical" versions of the relation between word and world (such as we find in the idea that names embody power, the idea that to "know a name is to know and possess an essence").<sup>479</sup> It is not that speaking is the "transfer of an essential content from one place to another, giving the subject unlimited access to the object", he writes, but rather that "if there is no primitive set of atomistic data to be labelled or catalogued, speech is always looking for means of representing an event and in some measure therefore prolonging or re-enacting an event."<sup>480</sup> In this way, speech is "moulded according to how an event goes; it shows the impact of the event": words might be said to bear the agency (rather than the essence) of what they speak of.<sup>481</sup> In this way, it would be "true to say" writes Williams, "that what is being spoken of has the speaker at its disposal, at least to the extent that the speaker's

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<sup>478</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid., 111.

stance in the world is for the moment of speaking defined by the presence of what is spoken of.”<sup>482</sup>

Recalling Coole’s name for the trajectory she traces in Merleau-Ponty’s thought, his movement from subject-focussed accounts of negativity to the generativity of the flesh, we might say that Williams’s work in *The Edge of Words* also “folds back on itself” at the point where the embodiment of language is explored, because this turn in the discussion allows him unequivocally to present the attributes of language established earlier in his argument – language’s freedom and innovation – as attributes of matter itself. He writes for example that “Rather than looking to material processes, understood as mechanical in fashion, as the key to understanding what language is, it would be nearer the truth to say that we look to language to show us what matter is.”<sup>483</sup> Speaking and sense making have to be seen as “intrinsically part of the order of things” rather than an “alien importation into a mechanical universe, an epiphenomenon that causes minor embarrassment to right-minded materialists.”<sup>484</sup> For Williams, language’s capacity for cutting links with environment, taking its distance from the immediacy of experience in some way (an ability we have found him acknowledging in his discussions of “falsity” or “mistakes” within language, and in his echoing of McGilchrist’s “ideal” movement from experience to abstraction and back to experience), is simply an occasion for the universe’s representation of itself to itself: human evolution, he insists, has produced a “reflexive dimension; which means that it has developed a capacity to stand apart from the causal nexus to the extent that it can represent itself – including its location in the material causal nexus.”<sup>485</sup>

If these statements bear a strong resemblance to some of the major themes that are pressed by the new materialist writers whose work we explored in the earliest stages of this argument, a number of other comparisons between Williams’s work and some of the themes present in Barad and Coole could be made (though these are necessarily just preliminary reflections aimed at highlighting notes of possible convergence). First, Williams’s persistence in referring to speaking subjects and represented objects is notable in places, and for the reader approaching his work with an ear for unidentified Cartesian

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<sup>482</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid., 61.

assumptions, this can initially be off-putting (his taking up of Percy's description of a triangulation between subject, object and symbol has been noted in this regard). But read in light of Williams's presentation of meaning and matter as inhabiting the same ontological plain, his use of these categories takes on a different meaning altogether: they become provisional rather than ontological designations. It is worth quoting at length his statement that the

I that thinks, observes, gestures and speaks is a *point of convergence* for a field of perception, discovering its locus and boundaries in the sheer fact of contact and continuity, experiencing the meaningful 'instruction' of someone else's gesture/sound delivered from another point of convergence; each 'I' is thus moulded by this as by other elements in the perceptive field. So what happens when a human subject arrives in the world...is neither the advent of a mysterious spiritual monad nor the coalescing of a bundle of contingently grouped sensations, but a new set of 'possibilities of situations'.<sup>486</sup>

Subject and object then, are not "two items standing alongside each other" but are rather "two phases in a complex life".<sup>487</sup> There is a sense in which the boundaries between them are performed or enacted, as a corollary of the fact that representing "is performing or enacting a form of being in a new mode".<sup>488</sup> Here we might find a point of similarity with Barad's nomenclature. Furthermore, Williams's idea of the capacity to represent as entailing the possibility of enlargement (the idea that communication is a shared "project" which builds naturally into more complex structures), combined with his identification of embodiment as the locus for the emergence of our representative capacity, aligns him with something like the description of subjectivity that Coole picks up from Merleau-Ponty. This is the idea of embodiment as a "hinge" across which the subject is spread: our paradoxical presence in the world as both object in the phenomenal field and representing subject is an occasion for the generativity of the flesh, a significant moment for the folding of the flesh.

Indeed Williams himself refers a number of times to the idea of the universe as an "unlimited flow of action" and subject and object as expressions of specific "in-foldings"

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<sup>486</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>488</sup> Ibid.

(he also refers to “clusterings”, or “crystallisations”) within one movement.<sup>489</sup> There is a sense then here of the universe as a fluid rather than a static entity. Williams does suggest that there is a trajectory towards complexity: this much must be acknowledged once we consider that “the unfolding story of material evolution leads to speech, to the expression and sharing of intelligible structure...which allows more and more creative ‘negotiating’ with other parts of the environment”.<sup>490</sup> But any sense of order that the universe manifests is expressed over time as an “*overall* direction of material existence towards coherent, sustainable, innovative, adaptable forms”.<sup>491</sup> Williams presents order as the product of a process that involves flux and negotiation as much as stability, and his designation of “innovative” forms as the apex of the evolutionary story suggests that the process might be considered open ended, as if nature is still in the business of becoming. A few comments will be made in the concluding section of this thesis about how this ontology might sit with a Christian teleology, since, as was argued in our treatment of Bennett, this is another area where some new materialist theorists assume there is a basic incompatibility between Christian theology and the post-constructivist agenda. In the meantime, our current chapter will end with a treatment of Williams’s understanding of the world as in some ways ordered towards God, and the coherence of his thesis overall, which holds together both a teleological argument and a picture of the universe as “becoming”, will (I hope) provide a helpful lead on this question, though a full discussion of it falls outside the scope of this project.

Two more observations might be made which relate Williams to Barad and Coole. The first pertains to a number of references within Williams’s work that suggest his theory of language collapses an assumed distinction between epistemology and ontology. He writes for example that “Material objects and the material world as such are always already ‘saturated’ with the workings of mind” so that “we cannot abstract the object we examine from the means we are using to examine it.”<sup>492</sup> If this reads like a sentence that Barad might use about the inseparability of scientific results from the material arrangements through which they were procured, further parallels emerge where Williams begins to discuss something very close to Barad’s idea of *phenomena* as primary ontological units, with the implication that knowledge will always be knowledge from

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<sup>489</sup> Ibid., 106, 108; 106, 109; 104.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>492</sup> Ibid., 101.

within phenomena. Williams acknowledges that syntactical language, with its emphasis on subjects, objects, and verbs, stands somewhat in the way of the plausibility of a more radical ontological monism because it depicts something more akin to isolated monads bumping into each other in the void. He endorses the work of Margaret Masterman as a thoughtful meditation on (and possible corrective for) this problem. Masterman proposes that the use of something like Chinese ideographic language could be a way of depicting “states of affairs in their most comprehensively imagined contexts”:

‘The playing of the impromptu cadenza of the last movement of the first performance of so-and-so’s Horn Concerto at the 1955 Edinburgh Festival’...becomes ‘1955-Edinburgh-Music-Festival-So-and-So-Horn-Concerto-First-Performance-Last-Movement-Impromptu-Cadenza-Play’.<sup>493</sup>

The idea is that adding successive qualifiers to the verb “play” presents this moment as an event which gathers various significant situations or convergences into one fold or cluster. “Truth” for Williams thus appears to relate, not to the idea of access to some timeless realm beyond speech, but to issues of specificity or comprehensiveness in our descriptions of situations, and to our acknowledgement of the unfinished or inconclusive nature of our descriptions.<sup>494</sup> What I encounter is never separable from how I encounter it, and thus I never “master this object given to my apprehension”: together we are part of “a specific in-folding of an unlimited flow of action.”<sup>495</sup> Truth is a matter of humility in the limitedness and localness of our own perspectives: language is not a “‘fallen’, distorting medium” as postmodernism sometimes presents it, but is “finite and historical”, and so must always be open to development and response.<sup>496</sup>

A final comment pertains to the possibility of compatibility between Williams’s philosophical account and the more political impetus within Coole and Barad (their desire to shift agency from the linguistic subject and onto the performative body, the advantages of which we saw in a more concrete form in the work of Siebers and Garland-Thomson). Though Williams does not go into an assessment of the political implications of his work in *The Edge of Words*, the closest he comes to doing so may be in his discussion of inter-subjectivity, which unfolds from his phenomenology of perception. One of the

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<sup>493</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>495</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>496</sup> Ibid., 167; 109. Coole’s understanding of truth in Merleau-Ponty as tied to his concept of endless dialectical engagement with the lifeworld is also worthy of notice in connection with this.

consequences of identifying the relational aspect of how objects come to be for a perceiving subject (the emergence of objects as a convergence of different possible perspectives) is that objects in the phenomenal field are always apprehended “as something shared: there is no point at which I have to make some conscious or half-conscious move outside of a private frame of reference to a shared one.”<sup>497</sup> A thick theory of inter-subjectivity is then immediately implied by his framework; perhaps even more strongly, his framework implies a fundamental dependency between actors, and a sense in which “trust” in each other might be basic to existence.<sup>498</sup> This means that “the broader our shared situation, the more securely we know and judge” and as a consequence we should be “wary of any strategy, cultural, religious, political, which assumes any perspective to be dispensable”.<sup>499</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, given the part that empathetic recognition plays in his thought, Williams insists that even theories that put “empathy” at the heart of ethics should be regarded with care. But his elaboration on this idea is helpful for working out an area of overlap with the new materialisms. In the case of people with ASD, he writes, there might be times when recognition within a shared *linguistic* framework breaks down, but we are still encountering another sense-maker because *bodies* are “the point of intersection for a specific set of symbolic transactions”: the “fact of *encountering another recognizable body* presents us with a human point of view”.<sup>500</sup> However irreducibly other, however opaque that point of view may seem to me, it is one that “I am likely to need in my own developing intelligent life.”<sup>501</sup> Williams retains a kind of humanism in his assessment of *human* bodies as the most significant situation for the reflexive capacity of the material world, and this may constitute a significant point of divergence between Williams and Barad. But what we have discussed places him quite close to Coole, whose radical inter-subjectivity and reconstruction of a kind of humanism in full awareness of its own contingency were noted in our first chapter.

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<sup>497</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>498</sup> Ibid., 113-5.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid., 116; 115.

<sup>501</sup> Ibid., 116.

### iii) God at the Edge of Words: Language, Matter and the Reframing of Natural Theology

While we have characterised Williams's work as searching for a space to inhabit between physicalism and Cartesianism, this is not the only way in which *The Edge of Words* seeks a middle ground, and we must now turn towards the framing of Williams's meditation on language to understand this work as part of a discussion about the future of "natural theology". Here too, Williams is found articulating a perspective between two traditions that have become polarized. The first, represented by the terms of Lord Gifford's bequest, relates to a belief that the natural world bears witness to God and that discourses about God might therefore be developed "without appealing to the unreliable authority of claimed revelation".<sup>502</sup> The second, represented notably by Karl Barth and more recently by Stanley Hauerwas, relates to a tradition of kicking over the traces to "protest at this framework."<sup>503</sup>

Williams's sympathies may lie finally with the concerns of those who have criticised "the inadmissibility of revelation and the irrelevance of sacred narrative and community practice in exploring the roots of our talk about God".<sup>504</sup> The problem with natural theology operating within the terms Lord Gifford set out for it is that, in an effort to avoid difficult questions about authority and tradition by bracketing out appeals to revelation and the God who "actively interrupts our perceptions or thought processes", natural theology presents God as a passive entity waiting to be discovered.<sup>505</sup> But Williams believes that the "insistence that we can *only* begin from tradition and community" is no less characterised by avoidance, because it suggests that "we don't have to worry about tracing the history of this or that mode of speech, how and where people learn to speak like this".<sup>506</sup> Gesturing to revelation and gesturing to "timeless metaphysical argument" are two strategies which share something in common, in that they both seek to bypass questions about the specifics of human habit and the experience of God.<sup>507</sup>

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<sup>502</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>504</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>505</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid., 3.

Put otherwise, if speaking about God is definitively different than speaking about another item in the universe, we might expect the “grammar” of this speech to be distinctive: the way it entered our parlance would be “to do with what is not resolved or controlled.”<sup>508</sup> But both the “anti-revelationist rhetoric of Lord Gifford’s natural theology” and “detailed descriptions of a revealed God” can “become opposites that unite to frustrate an adequate account of such grammar.”<sup>509</sup> By retreating into the confidence of the familiar,<sup>510</sup> the tradition which begins and ends with revelation can obscure the rupture or puzzlement of the everyday that we ought to associate with the divine act. God is then reduced to “another ‘department’ of description”,<sup>511</sup> that very problem the neo-orthodox tradition has criticised.

“What I should like to examine”, writes Williams “is whether there is a form of natural theology that is not about avoidance – so as to guard against the avoidance that an unqualified rejection of natural theology can lure us into”.<sup>512</sup> For Williams, a defensible natural theology would remain open to the idea of the apocalyptic disruption, the God who acts, while steering straight into the questions of history and habit that both positions evade: if there is “at the heart of Christian theology...a story with an imperative attached”, what “makes us able to learn to recognize such an imperative, let alone respond to it?”<sup>513</sup> Answering this question would require a “mapping exercise”, a contemplation of the everyday which would be alert for moments

where familiar description fails – not because we have identified a problem that for the time being we don’t have the resources to solve, but because something is apparently demanded of us – in order to make an adequate linguistic response to our situation – which is not just another attempt to describe agencies negotiating with each other or combining to effect a specific outcome.<sup>514</sup>

After identifying such shifts in register, it would need to be demonstrated that a response to the demands implicit in these moments “is not an arbitrary move, drawing us away from precision, labour, or indeed truthfulness.”<sup>515</sup> It would need to be shown, in other

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<sup>508</sup> Ibid., 3-5.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>512</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>515</sup> Ibid.

words, that the collections of idioms or models or metaphors that mark these shifts are not unrelated to the discourse which framed their formulation. As Williams sums up this second requirement, it would be “like putting the question ‘What sort of truth can be told only by abandoning most of our norms of routine description?’”<sup>516</sup>

To approach natural theology as a mapping exercise in this way is to recover an older tradition, and Williams makes his propositions more concrete by relating them to Aquinas’s “Five Ways” (as interpreted by Cornelius Ernst and Victor Preller).<sup>517</sup> Aquinas has been criticised for the “logical flaw” of moving from the assumption that every phenomenon is involved in causal relationships, to the conclusion that every phenomenon can be traceable to a single cause. But Williams argues that Aquinas’s intention is more accurately described as an attempt to show that if

it is part of the definition of every particular intelligible phenomenon we encounter that it is contingent...we can reasonably say that it is part of the definition of finite and intelligible being that it is invariably involved in processes of causation, and thus marked by dependence. All energy we encounter is involved in energy exchanges; but are we not then pushed to ask about the character of energy itself (pure act, in an older terminology)...?<sup>518</sup>

Aquinas is asking us to think to the edge of what we can intelligibly say, and then to notice that what we gesture towards at the end of this process of deduction cannot be described in the language we have so far been using. We have moved beyond talking about intelligible things, having already accepted that to be intelligible is to be caused. What we refer to is still “expressible only in connection with the language of dependence”, but “cannot be another *instance* of anything”, another “object to explore”.<sup>519</sup> What “is depended *on* is evoked”, writes Williams, but “we can’t formulate a sensible question as to what sort of thing it is that doesn’t depend because, by definition, we have now moved away from asking about *sorts* of things, and the questions that we started with no longer move us forward.”<sup>520</sup>

Aquinas’s method has been described by Preller as one designed “to lead the intellect through a series of judgments” which will move us to conclude paradoxically

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<sup>516</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>517</sup> Ibid., 6-8.

<sup>518</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>519</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>520</sup> Ibid.

that “the human intellect is ordered to a reality it cannot know”.<sup>521</sup> Williams’s summary of Aquinas is suggestive of his agreement with Preller that what is encountered at the edge of such a process of description is a “non-intelligible level of experience incapable of formulation in a conceptually meaningful question”.<sup>522</sup> Nevertheless, Williams departs from Preller on the further claim that we are ordered toward a reality we cannot *know*, an assertion that according to Williams “damagingly ignores just the complexities of what knowledge may mean”.<sup>523</sup> It is here that we might see how *The Edge of Words* relates to a culmination of interests that are present in Williams’s earlier work, and which were alluded to in our previous chapter: the intimate connection of *kenosis* (or variations on the theme, such as humility, self-abnegation, cruciformity, dispossession, or the acknowledgment of finitude and limit) and the knowledge of God (revelation, but also the related themes of mystical union, transfiguration, judgement and conversion). We have seen that Williams’s reading of Augustine highlights how the continuities between creation and the divine life steer us back to the fundamental discontinuities, with the implication that God’s revelation of himself is somehow bound up in creation’s otherness: the divine life as turned out towards the other is paradoxically most clearly imaged by humanity when we go into our finitude and approach God through time. Contemplation or the apprehension of God is then bound up with our imaging God through *kenosis*, a dispossession of our own will to transcend our circumstances and an acceptance of limit, an act which is made possible through the knowledge that because God is other to us His will is not in competition with ours.

So pervasive is this *kenosis*-revelation motif within Williams’s work that it might be considered a unifying idea of his theological vision.<sup>524</sup> It is the central interest in his reading of Lossky, who casts apophatic theology as most truly *theology* when understood, not as an intellectual or dialectical exercise (a corrective to cataphatic claims), but as a *kenotic* or cruciform attitude undergirding theology, and which opens onto or points towards – though it is not synonymous with – encounter with the being of God.<sup>525</sup> This

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<sup>521</sup> Victor Preller, cited in *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>524</sup> Further explanation of this claim is beyond the scope of this thesis, but I have included a few more examples of where the *kenosis*-revelation connection is present as unifying theme in a brief appendix to this thesis.

<sup>525</sup> See for example his work on Vladimir Lossky. Williams, “Lossky, the *via negativa* and the foundations of theology,” in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, edited by Mike Higton (London: SCM Press, 2007), 1-24. Especially 1-9 and 12-13.

thought is taken up by Williams in describing his own conception of correct theological method, where apophasis is named as that which governs the integrity of theological thought. Integrity means speaking “in a way that allows of answers”, the refusal to “finish” what can be said. But how can religious speech decline to take a totalizing perspective and still establish itself as talking about the “wholeness of the moral universe” with God as its context and origin, Williams asks?<sup>526</sup> Theology, he argues, must show itself to be “involved in bringing the complexity of its human world to judgement before God” and not “seeking to articulate or complete that judgement.”<sup>527</sup> Its constant interest in the particular will be one sign of this commitment: theology must tell a story of address and response in which (as in the Judeo-Christian story) “distorting responses to God” generate “their own re-formation” as they “conform to the reality of what it is that called them forth”.<sup>528</sup> The biblical writings tell this story because they are not just narrative, but constantly address God through liturgy. Christian speech must then be a “giving over” of our words to God, and this will be achieved in the extent to which theology speaks prayerfully, and in the extent to which it remains focussed on people who pray.<sup>529</sup> Prayer is an act of dispossession which signals a refusal of control or closure. Repentant language or the admission of failure, praise which celebrates acts of God that seem to have no direct relevance to the speaker, and the giving over of speech to a larger narrative that happens in the recapitulation of the paschal drama, are strategies of allowing ordinary speech to be interrupted or displaced in a way that moves us towards apophasis, the admission of the inadequacy of any attempt to picture God, which is expressed in attentive silence.<sup>530</sup> A theology shaped by these practises will display the penitent labour of revising its own workings, it will not seek to impose a normative style, and it “will not regard its conclusions as having authority independently of their relation to the critical, penitent community”.<sup>531</sup> A prayerful theology will not conceive of itself as a science, and might even display a rigour “directed *against* the naïve scientific model” because it will be constantly attentive for and critical of the presupposition “that there is a

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<sup>526</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 5-6.

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 13.

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-11.

<sup>531</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-13.

mode of religious utterance wholly beyond the risks of conversation”.<sup>532</sup> Summarising these thoughts, Williams writes that

the hope professed by Christians of immortal life cannot be a hope for a non-mortal way of seeing the world; it is rather the trust that what our mortality teaches us of God opens the possibility of knowing God or seeing God in ways for which we have, by definition, no useful mortal words.<sup>533</sup>

Referring to this pattern of thought in Williams’s work is important for our discussion of *The Edge of Words* for several reasons. It sheds some light on Williams’s insistence that his proposition for a natural theology conceived in line with his reading of Aquinas is not a “knock-down argument” for the existence of God.<sup>534</sup> In the same way that theology should refuse the temptation to complete some kind of “judgement” by totalizing its perspectives, natural theology reconceived as a method *as per* Aquinas’s “Five Ways” does “not move towards a probable conclusion from a survey of the evidence.”<sup>535</sup> Aquinas was not (on Williams’s reading) attempting to “come to an indisputable first point in the series”, nor was he “arguing from one kind of existent to another, let alone defining the kind of being that can’t help existing”.<sup>536</sup> Aquinas claims only that

we are faced with the question of whether we can manage to talk sensibly about a universe of contingent being without looking for some way of pointing to a ground or context in regard to which the language of contingency or dependence would not be intelligible.<sup>537</sup>

Natural theology is a framing exercise, and it acknowledges a need to go on even “when ‘ordinary’ description is done with”,<sup>538</sup> but this “going on” is an exercise which must “negotiate its way around a set of unprecedentedly sharp cautions” against “projecting beyond the material realm” any of the “mechanisms” or features that the descriptive process began with.<sup>539</sup>

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<sup>532</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>533</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>534</sup> Williams, *The Edge of Words*, xiii, 18.

<sup>535</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>536</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>538</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>539</sup> Ibid., 13.

But Williams's broader interest in the relationship between *kenosis* and revelation equally hints that his natural theology is not conceived as a process of deduction which issues finally in a starkly *agnostic* conclusion (his divergence from the proposition that our intellects are ordered to a reality we cannot "know" is given some definition against the backdrop of his earlier work). Rather natural theology is being reconceived as a kind of practice,<sup>540</sup> a going-down-into or a holding-up of what we understand of our finitude, and this practice gears ultimately toward an act of dispossession in the acknowledgement of having come to conceptual limits, some kind of edge to the question. This apex is then an apophatic moment, and as such may open

the speaker to what is not predicted or scripted: that which we now confront as the matter of our speech cannot be seen as simply passive to our commanding intellect...there is at least an opening to what can change the speaker, to what remains strange, resistant...<sup>541</sup>

The point made here is that the admission of having come to conceptual limits is not necessarily an ending, if it comes in as a proper refusal to control or contain what happens next. Elsewhere Williams has written that encounters with God may take us beyond what our conceptual language can cope with. But because it is wrapped up in the personal, the material, and the conscious (being the apprehension of God as that being through whom I am myself), contemplation of the divine cannot be correctly identified as beyond "knowledge".<sup>542</sup> safer to say perhaps that it is an experience in which the distinction between knowing and unknowing is transcended.<sup>543</sup> In *The Edge of Words* Williams revises Preller's statement with something like this implication: with regard to what we are "ordered" towards, we might "acknowledge our incapacity to form a concept – while at the same time enjoying a relation analogous to knowing in so far as we participate in an action directed towards us".<sup>544</sup>

Finally, in line with Williams's claim that good theology progresses in the knowledge that it is through our mortality (and not through possession of some irrefutable non-mortal discourse) that we learn about God, his articulation of natural theology distances itself "from a process of accumulating features of the natural world that can be

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<sup>540</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>542</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 12; Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 7, 12.

<sup>543</sup> As we find in Dionysius or Gregory of Nyssa, see Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 3.

<sup>544</sup> Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 34.

explained only by supposing a creative agent.”<sup>545</sup> This is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the comparison Williams invites between his proposition and the Buddhist method of *vipassana* meditation. The latter starts with a person’s recognition of suffering as a problem, and moves from here into a series of reflections on the world as a chain of infinite transaction and dependence (including “dependence on our synthesising habits of mind”).<sup>546</sup> Release from the “imprisoning effect of taking the phenomenal world as a simple given” – a moment of “cessation” or a “stilling of the cycle” – is arrived at through this methodical immersion in the chain of dependent origination.<sup>547</sup> The comparison is apt, Williams writes, because Buddhist meditation works up to a point of realisation, both that “everything falls under the rubric of dependent causation” and that “this is not an ending”.<sup>548</sup> In the same way, in what Williams seeks to articulate “there is no attempt to arrest the process by identifying a single first moment or first principle within the system. There is no search for a gap into which a special supernatural agency can be fitted.”<sup>549</sup> Precisely because it is a framing exercise, *explanatory* gaps (gaps that simply demand further “descriptive resources” that are not yet available) are not the object of focus.<sup>550</sup>

If this is the context for his argument, where do Williams’s observations on the freedom and materiality of language – manifest in the difficulty and complexity of speech – come in? Recalling that for Williams a natural theology must both map where we come to the edge of descriptive resources, *and* show how certain ways of going on are not arbitrary, we find that he concludes each of his generalisations about the behaviour of language with a question that they may prompt, but this is in turn followed by a reflection on how theology has traditionally sought to continue past these points, how it has “gone on” in ways that are intelligible. Revealed theology, he wants to suggest, does not answer the questions we arrive at in these moments but proposes something about why we are moved to ask them; it is not about “resolving difficulty but offering a perspective in which difficulty is what makes sense and what we must become accustomed to.”<sup>551</sup> His proposition that natural theology can play a complementary role in relation to revealed

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<sup>545</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>546</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid.

<sup>549</sup> Ibid.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>551</sup> Ibid., 180.

theology, by helping us to sharpen our understanding of what theology actually claims,<sup>552</sup> comes into view at these points. Speaking of his project overall, Williams notes that though he began with the question of “where language about God ‘came in’ in the world of routine or everyday speech”, his observations about language show that its behaviours are odd to start with: everyday speech is prone to interruptions and shifts in register.<sup>553</sup> But language about God poses “the most serious disruption of all”, and we might expect it to be “eccentric in a uniquely marked way”.<sup>554</sup>

For example, whilst Williams concedes that in our “intellectual climate” Aquinas’s assertions about causality might be unacceptable,<sup>555</sup> the unfinished or timeful nature of language, the complexity it moves into in response to the pressure to “say better”, and the finitude of speakers which these aspects imply, do press us towards the observation that dependence may be a basic reality of existence. The ways we speak – the ways I am opaque to others, the ways I must therefore listen for or join in a prior address, the risks I take when I speak in opening myself to the “perhaps abrasive” response of other speakers, and the fact that “I do not have the resources as an individual to sustain meaning or honesty in my own practice” –<sup>556</sup> all mean, for Williams at least, that “If we are to speak honestly about ourselves, we are committed to a more and more far-reaching investigation of dependence.”<sup>557</sup> It appears as if we are on constant lookout for “the most dependable and comprehensive resource for truthfulness”.<sup>558</sup> and if this tempts us to posit some framework in which this trajectory might be intelligible, whatever we spoke of could not be represented as “another point of view that itself needs assurance and challenge”,<sup>559</sup> another interest in competition with my own. In our previous chapter we saw that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* attempts to articulate such a framework (God as a self-sufficient entity on which creation unilaterally depends), and this is one way in which theology has sought to “go on”. But Williams also writes that the “phenomena of religious language...shows signs of working with difficulty, of having criteria for self-scrutiny and self-correction” in such a way that we might conclude it is “operating ‘as if’

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<sup>552</sup> Ibid.

<sup>553</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>554</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>556</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>557</sup> Ibid.

<sup>558</sup> Ibid.

<sup>559</sup> Ibid., 87-8.

it were dealing with something mind-independent”:<sup>560</sup> Jesus’ parables, for example, represent the unrepresentable by showing “the situations in which the choices made turn out to be choices as to whether or not to continue being open to the grace of the unspoken”.<sup>561</sup>

As a side note, but of significant interest given our argument in the previous chapter that a dogmatic assertion about God’s transcendence might prevent rather than cause the kinds of pathologies feminist writers sometimes attribute to Christian thinking (the idea that Christian theology supports acts of domination over the material world), it is worth following up on Williams’s cautionary statement about what can occur if we live with a sense of the world as an entity in which dependence is a given, but fail to “go on” in some of the ways Christian theology has attempted to. Either we “‘naturalize’ human identity as part of an indifferent order, or else we install ourselves as self-creators in God’s place.”<sup>562</sup> The implication here is that *losing* the theological framing for finite existence is what has led to our “rediscovering ourselves over-against nature”.<sup>563</sup>

Characterising finite being as dependent is a familiar move, but Williams draws another characteristic out of his observations. The fact that representing seems to be a basic and incessant practice (the fact that language is not apparently “a matter of a certain determinate set of facts or truths causing/triggering a certain determinate set of signs”),<sup>564</sup> installs us in an imaginative context in which a kind of indeterminate intelligibility might be named as metaphysically basic: it appears that to be finite means to be representable in ways that are (from our vantage point) without limit.<sup>565</sup> To invoke words we considered at an earlier point in this discussion, Williams writes that our sense that there will always more to say, and our confidence that “what we say itself *alters* what we can say next” so that we are enlarged by our speaking,<sup>566</sup> together suggest that

At one end of the learning-knowing relation stands an object which is constantly being uncovered at different levels or in different perspectives, as if there is in principle no end to the ways in which it can be understood and represented; at the other is a subject which

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<sup>560</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>565</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>566</sup> Ibid., 61.

is constantly involved in drawing out the life of what is represented by more and more initiatives in ‘reading’ the object through one medium or another.<sup>567</sup>

There is then a sense in which what we encounter is never “exhausted”, “absorbed”, or “reduced” by our representations of it,<sup>568</sup> and a way in which we are part of an “upward spiral of partnership with our language to produce new representations – apparently without any final state of ‘adequacy’”.<sup>569</sup> The picture evoked is one of abundance or even generosity, of finite reality “giving” itself “to be known” in a way that “enlarges our capacity and serves our welfare”.<sup>570</sup> Christian theology has spoken of creation (or the “elements of the universe that we know”) as “crystallizations of” an “unbounded intelligence perceiving the innumerable ways in which its own life may be reflected in bounded form”,<sup>571</sup> and in this spirit Eckhart names God as “the terminus of all acts of naming but also that which is incapable of being named.”<sup>572</sup> To speak so is not to arrive at a conclusion that could not be otherwise, but neither is this language without warrant.

Exploring the representative capacity as material – or materiality as inherently bent towards language – intensifies what we have to say about dependence, the limitedness of our vantage points, and about the engulfing and abundant nature of intelligibility. That matter carries or embodies signals, that our embodiment absorbs these messages and seeks to continue their life within new media, and that through these activities and in collaboration with other intentional bodies both subjects and objects materialise in ways that can be productive, are factors which suggest we inhabit a symbolic complex, a material system which is meaning-saturated and intelligence-bound. But it is also then a universe in which to understand means “to be engaged with and in a shared situation”, and in which to be truthful means to do “maximal justice to the diversity and plurality of a situation”.<sup>573</sup> In this fluid context, when fresh connections come to light for us, others are hidden from our particular view.<sup>574</sup> Williams comments that the “systematically secular attitude” – through a proper wariness about lazy or vague allusions to what is “mysterious” in the face of questions that can in fact be answered – wrongly assumes that “we should be able to reach and expose any ‘hiding places’, any

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<sup>567</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>568</sup> Ibid.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>570</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>571</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>572</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>573</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>574</sup> Ibid., 119.

aspects of what we encounter that appear to resist conclusive description”.<sup>575</sup> But if the use of metaphor is not a leisure activity (if that is, language cannot be reduced to a foundational repertoire of descriptive terms giving us access to objects and their essence) then we are faced with two realities. First, we seem to approach our environment as if the “shifting and constantly expanding perspectives of historical processes of understanding have no ends as far as we are concerned”:<sup>576</sup> language refuses to settle and manifests its difficulty, as if it is in the wake of “intelligible relations whose full scale is still obscure to us”.<sup>577</sup> Second, we continue in these practices in a way that presupposes confidence that we will always encounter a kind of “consistency”, “coherence”, “unity” or “regularity” which we are nevertheless incapable of representing “in its wholeness”.<sup>578</sup> In fact “we do not and cannot know what it would be to apprehend the universe as a whole”, and yet the apprehension of “the symbolic character of the material environment” and the consistency it suggests does lend itself to the question “to what or in relation to what could the universe as a whole be intelligible?”<sup>579</sup> The “imagination of a universal consistency” demands an imagination of “the universe as a whole as known”, but whatever it was that could perceive the universe in its entirety would not be another mind among other minds.<sup>580</sup>

We began this chapter with Dawkins’s expectation that Christian theology is forced take advantage of the explanatory gaps in a physicalist explanation of the universe (an explanation that Dawkins deems to be broadly convincing, though he concedes there are as-yet-undiscovered pieces to the puzzle). In our previous chapter we found Bennett making something of the same accusation, though unlike Dawkins she considers mechanistic materialism to be an untenable account of matter. Divine transcendence, these critical voices protest, is being used to underwrite a dualistic ontology, an ontology which is anathema in Dawkins’ perspective, because there will eventually be a causal explanation for our utterances, and in Bennett’s perspective, because of the damaging results of the failure to acknowledge vitality and consciousness as capacities that are implicated in matter itself. Bennett’s criticism gave us reason to ask whether the doctrine of divine transcendence can be hospitable to the idea of non-dichotomy: surely, she

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<sup>575</sup> Ibid.

<sup>576</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>577</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>579</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid., 118-9.

appears to suggest, the gaps within mechanistic materiality are too convenient for Christian thought.

There may be forms of Christian theology susceptible to these criticisms, and indeed Williams considers that some forms of natural theology can be rightly criticised for reducing God to one candidate in a list of causes, a name we bring in where material explanation fails. But in light of Williams's reflections on language, and in light of where they fit into his reflections on God, we have to conclude that something very different to this idea is being worked out in his thought. In the last chapter we used Williams's work to argue that a rigorous account of divine transcendence could lead us to contemplate a non-dichotomous and universally vital account of creation, within which humans are embedded so that they share in its finitude and limitedness. In this chapter we have found Williams meditating on language in ways that resonate strikingly with some of the ontological propositions that several new materialist feminists are exploring, but this thinking takes place within a broader argument that states that reflection on – even immersion in, or acceptance of – the materiality of language and all that it entails, may prompt us in several ways towards the apprehension of what is beyond our understanding and control, a transcendent entity whose impress can be traced but who is not passive to our investigations. The possible convergences between natural theology and revealed theology that Williams posits no doubt deserve careful probing from a theological perspective,<sup>581</sup> but few could doubt Williams's care in seeking to preserve the central insights about divine transcendence and creation's unilateral dependence that stand at the heart of Christian dogma. His account of natural theology is recognisably orthodox, and can trace a long and vital heritage within the history of Christian thought. For all of these reasons, Williams's account poses a significant challenge to the assumption that, within conversations which raise the question of the non-dichotomy of matter and meaning, theology will have nothing to contribute.

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<sup>581</sup> Because our argument is aimed at responding to question of whether a doctrine of divine transcendence is inimical to non-dichotomous thought, this question must be left aside.

## Conclusion

A significant number of writers reflecting on the current status of feminism admit that the intellectual shifts that have underpinned the third-wave era have been in certain ways costly for the movement. Challenges to the sex/gender and culture/nature binaries may have rightly highlighted the significant constructive power of language, and questioned the assumption that neutral knowledge about gender identity can be derived through appeals to “nature”. But, as Heckman puts it “a whole generation of feminist scholars has been taught to put ‘matter’ into scare quotes”,<sup>582</sup> and this has led many theorists to claim that, far from successfully deconstructing the binaries that underpin patriarchy, the constructivist or post-structuralist critique has granted unlimited power to “culture”, while conceptions of the material world as a meaningless entity awaiting human inscription have become further ingrained. Furthermore, the claim that emancipatory discourses create the subjects they represent has had some negative impacts on the political viability of emancipatory movements. Hames-Garcia and Siebers remind us that however identities are constituted, they have material consequences, and yet because constructivism cannot recognise the epistemological value of experience, we have lost some of the tools for discerning between “subjective” and “arbitrary” claims about the impact of discrimination.

While the new materialists treat many of Butler’s claims sympathetically, they call for critical theories which can take some of the claims of post-structuralism forwards, while at the same time recovering a sense of the agency of matter so that fresh insight might be gained into the material aspects of identity. Towards this goal, Barad and Coole are engaged in the task of retheorising the relationship between culture and nature at the ontological level. Barad presents modernism and post-modernism alike as products of a representationalist paradigm. Reading the work of Bohr through Butler’s theory of performativity, she argues that scientific objects are inseparable from scientific apparatuses, that material arrangements therefore play a performative role in the knowledge practices through which subjects and objects emerge, and that we must therefore see matter and meaning as inseparable. Realism can be reconceived, and a

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<sup>582</sup> Heckman, *The Material of Knowledge*, 72.

certain kind of objectivity becomes possible, where we understand our knowledge to be knowledge from within *phenomena*. Coole's phenomenological contribution explores the work of Merleau-Ponty to show the agency of both intentional and inert bodies in the emergence of the subjects and objects of perception. By following Merleau-Ponty, as he extends the metaphor of "folded flesh" to his concept of nature, and characterises material existence itself as pocketed with the latent possibilities of the negative, Coole begins to construct a political theory that focuses on agentic capacities and intersubjective dynamics, rather than the agentic subject. Together these theorists agree that both "subjects" and "objects" are emergent, and that they are embedded in a material existence which is agentic, fluid, and endlessly innovative. They propose that we can formulate certain kinds of knowledge claims if we do so with an awareness of the contingency of both the subjects and objects of our knowledge, their coexistence within provisional "folds" in the flesh of a material universe.

The work of Siebers and Garland-Thomson demonstrates the promise of Barad's and Coole's ontological reflections by showing the ways these ontologies might foster new approaches to political praxis for emancipatory movements. But for the theologian or Christian feminist interested in a theological engagement with this field of discourse in virtue of these merits, it is notable that some significant voices amongst the new materialists are doubtful that Christian theology has much to offer within this conversation. Bennett claims that Christianity is tethered to a life/matter binary underwritten by a conception of God as all-powerful and creation as dependent. She argues these binaries and the conception of a static created order of creation run in opposition to the immanentism posited by new materialists, and their belief in a free, fluid and innovative material existence. We have argued that in light of these challenges, a theological engagement with the new materialists might attend to three major questions. Can dogmatic articulations of the doctrine of creation be hospitable to a non-dichotomous conception of matter and meaning? Are Christian concepts of selfhood or the soul necessarily tied up with an ontological distinction between human life and mere matter? And, do Christian understandings of creation's ordering towards its creator prohibit theology from positing a fluid, innovative, or productive universe?

While the last question went beyond the scope of this thesis, and similarly the question of the human soul was left to one side, our engagement with Williams provides us with some leads as to how these questions might be addressed in further research. In

our second chapter, we found Williams engaged in an argument about the unelidable difference between God and creation, and we argued that his articulation of this doctrine entails an understanding of humans as imaging God through their acceptance of creatureliness. Though this does not explicitly answer our question as to the nature of the soul or the compatibility of this belief with non-dichotomous thought, Williams's interest in de-spatializing concepts like the *imago Dei* and human selfhood (so that our relation to God is understood in terms of time rather than space) is a notable theme across his work.<sup>583</sup> It would be reasonable to expect that his understanding of the soul might bear certain resemblances to this pattern of argumentation, and indeed in the Oxford debate that took place between Dawkins and Williams, Williams relates the concept of the soul to the self-reflexive consciousness which makes humans capable, even as material beings, of a relationship with God. He describes the soul as “the form of the body”, something which emerges in the material life of people, and he presents belief in the soul as a matter of faith, not in an ontological entity, but in a relationship we share with God.<sup>584</sup> Further investigation on the issue could engage with these propositions.

In terms of our question about Christian conceptions of created order, we argued in our third chapter that Williams holds together a coherent position which includes both a concept of creation as being in certain ways fluid and innovative (subjects and objects emerge within contingent in-foldings of the flesh), and a concept of creation as ordered towards the apprehension of God. In fact, Williams's argument for creation's innovativeness is material to his argument for such an order: in his re-conception of natural theology he contends that reflection on language shows us that intelligence is a natural trajectory of creation. The fact that the hazardous process of evolution has produced self-reflexive intelligence is wrapped up in the way creation is ordered toward an apprehension of its Creator. Further research into this question would need to pay careful attention to which conceptions of created order new materialist critics might have in mind in their criticisms (Bennett assumes that the orthodox conception is of a static hierarchical order), and such a study would be complicated by the fact that concepts of an “order of creation” are by no means uniform across Christian thought. Moreover, though

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<sup>583</sup> This comes through especially in his readings of Augustine. See Rowan Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” in *Augustine and His Critics*, eds. Dodaro and Lawless (London and New York: Routledge: 2000), 105-23, especially 110; Rowan Williams, “*Sapientia* and the Trinity: Reflections on *De trinitate*”, *Collectanea Augustiniana: Mélanges T.J. Van Bavel* eds. Bernard Bruning, Mathijs Lamberigts and J. van Houtem (Leuven: Lueven University Press, 1990), 317-32, especially 321.

<sup>584</sup> Dialogue with Professor Richard Dawkins and Archbishop Rowan Williams, Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford University, 23 February, 2012.

Barad's and Coole's concepts of "fluidity" or "open-ended becoming" share much in common, within the new materialisms there is some variety in how these themes are expressed. In conversation with these different understandings, it would be an interesting discussion whether a material existence which was productive of meaning could sensibly be thought of as devoid of any order.

Our thesis, however, focussed primarily on the question of whether the doctrine of creation and its presentation of creation as unilaterally dependent on a transcendent God forms the underpinnings of a binary approach to culture and nature. Our responses were framed by Bennett's presentation of the new materialisms as falling somewhere between vitalism and mechanistic materialism. Bennett claims Christianity is a form of vitalism because it presents matter as inert and predetermined, and life as a principle detachable from it but which animates it. Christians, according to Bennett, readily accept mechanistic accounts of matter, and where explanatory gaps appear in these accounts, they posit God as explanation. God, within Christian thought, is thus the agent responsible for animating matter with "life", and because Christians believe humans as the *imago Dei* are the most vital component of creation, Christian vitalism sanctions acts of cultural domination over the material world.

In order to address these concerns, we related Bennett's claims to those of McFague and Primavesi, both feminist critics of orthodox theology who claim God's exercise of cultural power over an inert creation authorizes humans to do likewise. Williams's response to these claims was used to argue that the doctrines of divine transcendence and creation *ex nihilo* underwrite something like the opposite of this model. Creation within Christian thought is a bringing forth from nothing, not a moulding of something which already exists. It is therefore not rightly thought of as any kind of process, let alone an exercise of despotic power, because God and creation are not inhabitants of the same system, and creation is not exercised on anything. Moreover, creation *ex nihilo* is a way into a positive insight into the nature of God's life as turned out towards the "other", and creation therefore speaks of God best in its otherness. To image God within such a scheme is to accept one's dependence and immersion within a finite creation, and this acceptance is made possible through the knowledge that God is independent of His creation and does not have interests which compete with our own. To conclude this argument, we suggested that material creation could be thought of as universally vital, given it shares in God's life. And we considered that Bennett's

assertions about divine transcendence and its implications look dubious against Williams's reading of Christian doctrine: the doctrine of creation could be hospitable to a kind of ontological monism.

But a second response to the question is also possible which turns this conclusion on its head. Contrary to Bennett's claim that Christian thought colonises the gaps in a mechanistic materialism, so that its dualism is the flipside of its belief in a static matter, in both Williams's debate with Dawkins, and his latest work on the theology of language, we find him engaged in mapping out a middle ground between physicalism and representationalism. What inhabits this middle ground bears striking resemblances to the kind of agentic materialism that Barad and Coole posit. Williams's dismissal of Rorty's radical physicalism depends on an understanding of language as complex and difficult, both of which features hint towards the materiality of language. While the pervasive activity of representation implies that matter is fundamentally intelligible, the human capacity to recognise representations is intrinsically related to embodiment. Moreover, Williams uses Merleau-Ponty's conception of language as an extension of gesture – a physical and relational strategy of making sense which participates in the emergence of both subjects and objects – to argue for an understanding of language as the self-reflexive capacity of a material universe.

Despite the ways in which Williams's understanding of language and matter resonates with new materialist claims, his reflections belong to a theological argument of a surprising kind, given Bennett's criticisms. Reflection on the non-dichotomy of language and matter, he contends, might lead us to identify dependence and intelligibility as metaphysical basics. It is not illogical to posit a certain kind of framework for making sense of these characteristics: reflection on the inextricability of matter and meaning might lead us to reflect on a transcendent God. Furthermore, to make a natural theology argument of this kind is not to look for God in the explanatory gaps of a mechanistic materialism. This and many other points just made have been part of an attempt to show that any exclusion of theology from the new materialist conversation on the basis of the kinds of objections that Bennett makes would be unwarranted. But the deeper hope here is that the constructive value (for both disciplines) of a dialogue between the new materialisms and Christian theology might be glimpsed in this discussion.

## Appendix

### (An extended note on the kenosis-revelation connection in Williams)

As per our discussion on page 111, and as well as examples we have seen throughout this piece (for example, Williams's insight that contemplation of God comes through apprehension of God as that through whom I am myself), a few further instances where *kenosis* and the knowledge of God (or similar themes) are connected in his work can be listed as follows:

In his reading of Augustine on evil, Williams argues that Augustine rightly recognised that having the right grammar of evil is tied up with having the right grammar of God. Augustine is engaged in “de-spatialising” talk about both: reflection on evil as the product of a process reminds us that creation only realises its goods in time, and that creation's relation to God is rightly spoken of in terms of time rather than space. Augustine's conception of evil drives us toward reflection on a God who is not in rivalry with us as another inhabitant in the universe and whose good can therefore be our good. Williams concludes the article by asserting that for Augustine, “talking about God is always talking about the temporal processes of clarification, reconciliation, self-discovery in love, the processes that lead us beyond rivalry and self-protection; talking about God is the articulation of self-knowledge that grasps the central dependence of the self, a knowledge of the self as lacking and searching and, thus, as presupposing a goal of desire that exceeds any specific state of affairs in this world.” See Rowan Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” in *Augustine and His Critics*, eds. Dodaro and Lawless (London and New York: Routledge: 2000), 105-23. Quotations 110, 121.

In summarising Augustine on *sapientia* in *De Trinitate*, Williams argues *sapientia* (the knowledge of what is eternal) comes through yielding to a divine action directed towards us. Contrary to those who have presented Augustine as championing a picture of the individual self-contained subject as the image of God, Williams argues that we do not image God simply in virtue of the structure of the self, nor is imaging God “a matter of perfecting our possession of certain qualities held in common with God”, but it entails a move into our creatureliness, dependence, and timefulness: a submission to God as His loved creatures. In this relation we come to know God by participating in His *kenotic* action towards us, his “life as turned ‘outwards’”. See Rowan Williams, “*Sapientia* and

the Trinity: Reflections on *De trinitate*,” in *Collectanea Augustiniana: Mélanges T.J. Van Bavel*, eds. Bernard Bruning, Mathijs Lamberigts and J. van Houtem (Leuven: Lueven University Press, 1990), 317-32. For quotation, 321.

Augustine’s mature Christology identifies Christ with *sapientia*, Williams argues elsewhere, and the results of the incarnation are an embrace of our humanity and “a resistance of all that draws us away from the recognition of the centrality of *time* in our learning of holiness”. As an act of grace, the incarnation “humbles us so that we may accept humility as the way to truth”. As the knowledge of God’s love, it allows us to face ourselves honestly in our weakness and so acknowledge our sin. Through humility and repentance we displace our own desires and are able to love, and through love we know God. See Rowan Williams, “Augustine’s Christology: Its Spirituality and Rhetoric,” in *In the Shadow of the Incarnation: Essays on Jesus Christ in the Early Church in Honor of Brian E. Daley, S.J.*, edited by Peter W. Martens (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 176-89. Quotations, 177-8.

In *Anglican Identities*, Williams considers a number of George Herbert’s poems, which deal with the Calvinist’s anxiety about having been saved, but experiencing no outward signs to confirm this. The poet experiences a “motionless frustration and doubt”, knowing the “impossibility of falling out of God’s hands”: he is justified, but has lost any way of experiencing justification in its classical sense of playing one’s right role in the order of things. In each poem, the poet protests until he exhausts himself, and what is left is the voice of resignation, the realisation that “To go on being conscious of a disparity between God’s grace and my deserving can be, not humility, but a refusal to let go of the self.” For Williams, the resignation of the poet is what makes the poems transparent to divine action: the poet understands at the end of all his protestations that it is his resignation which mirrors divine activity, and so the poems “enact the movement of a grace of self-dispossession within their own words”. See Rowan Williams, *Anglican Identities* (Darton: Longman and Todd Ltd, 2004), 59, 67, 68.

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