Interpretation, Materiality, and Subjectivity:
New Materialism's Challenge to Hermeneutics

Francis Léveillé

A Thesis

in

The Department

Of

Sociology and Anthropology

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts (Sociology) at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

June 2023

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Francis Léveillé

Entitled: Interpretation, Materiality, and Subjectivity : New Materialism's
Challenge to Hermeneutics

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Sociology)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with
respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

_____Chair
Dr. Christine Jourdan

_____Examiner
Dr. Greg Nielsen

_____Examiner
Dr. Chris Hurl

_____Thesis Supervisor
Dr. Matthew Unger

Approved by _____
Dr. Christine Jourdan – Graduate Program Director

July 18, 2023

_____
Dr. Pascale Sicotte – Dean of Faculty

Abstract

Interpretation, Materiality, and Subjectivity: New Materialism's Challenge to Hermeneutics

Francis Léveillé

This thesis attempts to bridge the recent gap between materiality and subjectivity in social theory. The material world is increasingly becoming a central topic in social theory. Emerging from this movement, new materialism turns our attention to a physical, tangible world that exists outside of our interpretations and representations of it. This new focus on materiality is however usually seen as being incompatible with theories that came out of the linguistic turn in philosophy during the second half of the 20th century because these focus on subjective understandings of socially constructed realities. We are now faced with two distinct agendas in social theory with one focusing on materiality and the other on subjectivity. Environmental justice turns our attention towards the materiality of the Earth and social justice claims that we rather need to focus on specific subjectivities for emancipation. To break this stalemate in social theory, and to bridge the distance between environmental justice and social justice this research sets up an encounter between the vital materialism of Jane Bennett and the hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur. A connection is found in both theories' critique of modernity.

Acknowledgments

I very much appreciate that tradition asks us to take a moment to thank those who supported us as we finalize our work. This project has been supported by so many great souls, I cannot thank everyone all at once but here are a few personalized notes:

Matt: Thank you for your incredible patience and support. Also, for keeping me away from Ricoeur's analytical philosophy period. And finally, for getting me to read sci-fi, this will most likely follow me much longer than any other thing I learned during my MA.

Greg and Chris: Thank you for your amazing comments and questions as I finalized my thesis and during my defence.

D^2: Thank you for reminding everyone that academia does not need to be a pretentious thing.

Kerstyn: The beautiful ceramic mugs you gave me held many caffeinated beverages that helped me finish writing and editing this thesis.

Tristan: It's very comforting to follow this life trajectory with a close friend.

James: It's so rare to find another student who likes theory!

Naimah: I love having you as my number one reader.

And thank you to everyone else.

I love you all.

Contents

Figures

Introduction

> Because of the indefinite nature of the human mind, wherever it is lost in ignorance, man makes himself the measure of all things. (Vico 1948:53)

In her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), Jane Bennett argues that social sciences should pay more attention to the impact of the material world in the analysis of any event. In her introduction, she calls for a modified demystification while asserting that demystification is usually understood as a *hermeneutics of suspicion* which seeks to uncover the true human agency behind an event. Bennett suggests that we should partly suspend this critical attitude and adopt a willingly naïve and open-ended approach where non-human agency can also be seen as playing a role. Bennett only makes reference to hermeneutics this one time in her introduction, but it reminds us that what lies behind the modified demystification she develops throughout her book is a hermeneutic subject, a subject who interprets the social world. In keeping with the tradition of hermeneutic thought, this subject primarily understands itself through its interpretation of its social environment. Bennett argues that in order to theorize the impact of materiality, we should break free from such analyses revolving around a single subject and its understanding of others.

> To attempt, as I do, to present human and nonhuman actants on a less vertical plane than is common is to bracket the question of the human and to elide the rich and diverse literature on subjectivity and its genesis, its conditions of possibility, and its boundaries. The philosophical project of naming where subjectivity begins and ends

is too often bound up with fantasies of a human uniqueness in the eyes of God, of escape from materiality, or of mastery of nature; and even where it is not, it remains an aporetic or quixotic endeavor. (Bennett 2010:ix)

In this thesis, I want to take on the challenge of materiality presented by Bennett, but without getting rid of the hermeneutic subject. Some authors have already made a first step towards a similar question. For instance, in his expansion of hermeneutics to science and technology, Don Ihde (1998) argues that the task of hermeneutics can be to interpret human-technology relations. Ihde argues that by developing its phenomenological roots, we can turn hermeneutics to science and that an "essentially hermeneutic process leads us into a deeper understanding of technological phenomena." (1998:42) From the resulting interpretations, technological phenomena are understood through their relation to humans. Jane Bennett would probably critique this approach to materiality – technological or not – because it affords primacy to the human. With this approach, the material world is still primarily understood as being in relation to humans. Bennett argues that we should move away from the idea that dualisms such as body-mind and subject-object can only be understood via their interrelation. Instead, they should be viewed as two distinct realities that can be taken into account separately. In the same vein, Graham Harman (2014) suggests that "a social and linguistic construction of reality does indeed take place, but there is already a reality there prior to any construction." (127) I contend that the primary reality authors like Bennett and Harman discuss can be accounted for without abandoning prior theories that inform us about the self and subjectivity in a socially constructed world. As a philosophy of social science, hermeneutics provides us with tools to understand this linguistically and socially constructed reality.

Bennett makes use of Paul Ricoeur's lexicon solely once with the term *hermeneutics of suspicion*, but this, to me, still represents a sufficient connection to ask the following question: can Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology make sense of or integrate the question of materiality raised by Bennett's vital materialism? Is it possible to view nature as participating in the production of culture while holding onto theories of textual interpretation in our analysis of culture? This question must be posed while conceiving that matter is totally foreign to humans and largely free from their influence. In attempting to connect interpretive thought to an ontology of matter, Ricoeur seems fit in the sense that he redirects phenomenology away from immediate consciousness. There is the possibility of a rapprochement in the fact that Ricoeur's philosophy is also grounded in a critique of modern thought and a decentred, destructive ontology. Ricoeur attempts to recover the self epistemologically through the interpretation of language; he asserts that the self cannot be directly understood in the face of subjective experiences. The self must be brought back via the interpretation of signs, symbols and language. This interpretive movement can potentially integrate the question of materiality. But does this enterprise still remain fundamentally at odds with current post-human philosophies as it seeks to recover a semblance of objectivity via the subjective, and consequently by keeping the human at the center of the inquiry? Perhaps. In expanding hermeneutics to materiality, the question we should ask is then, "how can we understand ourselves better with hermeneutics while taking into account materiality?" rather than, "how can hermeneutics help us understand materiality?".

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

As it was hinted to above, I view new materialist theories such as Bennett's vital materialism and anti-positivist theories like hermeneutics as two different critical reactions to the foundations of modern thought. In this thesis, I will thus analyze Bennett's vital materialism and Ricoeur's hermeneutics as two different moments of decentering of the human subject. This very first axiom of the elements of Giambattista Vico's *New Science* used as an epigraph to this introduction exemplifies the essence of the critique of modern thought that can partially be seen in both new materialism and hermeneutics. In fact, the critique of the humanist tendency to view the human as the center of all knowledge can be seen both as a critique of metaphysics and positivism in favour of a decentred subject, and as a critique of anthropocentrism.

From the point of view of hermeneutics, Vico's axiom may critique a thinker who sees all valid knowledge as emerging from its point of view. Following this universalist ahistorical approach, knowledge emerges from a single summit at the thinker's perspective through a theoretical attitude akin to the natural sciences. In search for meta-narratives, a single thinker or school of thought makes itself "the measure of all things" by failing to consider the perspective, and historical and cultural context of varying social groups. Critiquing this modern tendency of situating the human subject above all else, Edmund Husserl argues in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1970) that it is solely directed toward abstract ideas and aims at uncovering absolute truths. Husserl theorized transcendental phenomenology as a solution to the attitude he critiques and thought that it would provide a method for the "study of objects and the world as they appear to consciousness." (Porter & Robinson 2011:9) Many

theorists that followed him pointed out that his idealism would still lead him to a search for meta-narratives as the subject is not questioned in his philosophy and is still at the center of the inquiry. Husserl's phenomenology would, however, provide the base for the more complete and coherent critique of modernity's positivist attitude that we can find in the decentred subject of the major contemporary hermeneutic philosophers – Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and Charles Taylor. In introducing a decentred subject, Taylor (1994) asserts that interpretive or hermeneutical human sciences work with an object of study that is unclear or of which our understanding is incomplete. This object is the first necessary element of interpretive sciences and is completed only insofar as there is a subject present towards which the meaning of the object is directed. Also, and most importantly for us, this subject is not initially defined. Interpretive human sciences attempt to recover the human subject by understanding its experiences through interpretation. This tradition takes as its foundation the principle that human experience is never given, never interpretable to its full extent. Thus, the interpretation of the subject as to go through various detours such as culture, institutions and symbols (objects of interpretation). From the principle that the social world is inherently meaningful, follows the key assumption that social life is primarily defined and analyzable through interpretation and understanding. This results in a double interpretive framework formed of the studied interpretation and the interpretation that forms the study itself. In other words, one understands the social world by constantly interpreting it while the social world is defined by the understandings that result from these interpretations. Interpretive thinkers do not see this roundabout as a dead end, but rather as something that can be taken advantage of. We can see here how the subject is decentred by being partly removed from the center of the inquiry for it is never fully defined. Meaning is always initially found outside of the subject. Following this, Ricoeur asserts, with a formulation that reminds us of Vico's axiom,

that his philosophy tackles "the pretension of consciousness in setting itself up as the origin of meaning." ([1974]2007a:20)

A more recent current of thought to which Jane Bennett belongs suggests that the human subject should be not only decentered but rather completely removed from social scientific analyses. I will not go further here for the first chapter of the thesis is dedicated to a more comprehensive description of this movement. Most importantly, it is the distance between these two critiques of modern thought that forms the larger theoretical problem I am interested in. The first half of the twentieth century has motivated Western social theorist to protect the human against itself by violently showing the fact that humanity can fail itself. And now, technological developments and environmental destruction during the century's second half are motivating us to guard the natural world against humanity itself. The ethical agenda of both of these theoretical currents seem commendable, but both of them remain in partial opposition. I argue that social constructionist and new materialist theories have evolved in their respective silos while very few attempts at rejoining the two have been made. As examples of such attempts, Don Ihde's material hermeneutics (2022) is an approach to science and technology studies that considers the interpretation work behind human uses of technology, Couldry and Hepp (2017) assert that media studies need to consider the subject as being mediated by technology as much as by cultural texts, and Rosa, Benning, and Bueno (2021) argue that critical theory and post-human philosophies can coexist in a productive collaboration. My thesis aims at contributing to these sparse attempts at understanding contemporary social theory in an open and flexible way. Now, as a last step, I must take the time to further explain why I believe that a revival of Paul Ricoeur's thought is adequate for this challenge.

WHY PAUL RICOEUR?

This project began as an exploration of the thought of Paul Ricoeur which is generally underappreciated in social theory courses. In no small part because of his move to the United States after going through difficult experiences as the Dean of the Faculty of Letters at Nanterre during the 1968 protests, Ricoeur is often seen as being in the shadows of other post-structuralist thinkers. Joas and Knöbl (2009), however, argue that Ricoeur's legacy will most likely be increasingly important as his discussions on an astounding variety of theoretical issues are being closely interpreted and appropriated. Here, I will present first a theoretical, and second an anecdotal reason for why I think Ricoeur's writings offer a lot of value to the analysis I am putting forward.

First, by including an unreachable element – the natural world – in our analysis of ourselves, we are asked to understand human existence with an extra layer of contingency and humility. This necessity for increased humility is not an idea that is foreign to Ricoeur since he himself argued in the late 80s that "nothing is needed more today than a bit less arrogance and a bit more modesty in carrying on the task of critiquing and of retrieving our historical substance." (Ricoeur 1988:59) This focus on humility that certainly followed Ricoeur throughout his career, originates in the fact that, similarly to new materialists, he always acknowledges various epistemological limits. Most notably, as a devout Christian, Ricoeur theorized such an epistemological limit by imagining a God that cannot possibly be known. According to Alison Scott-Baumann (2013, 2019), Ricoeur studied negation and apophatic theology extensively in the 50s and 60s but published very little on the topic. His research is mostly kept in his reading notes which Scott-Baumann has studied and reported on in multiple works. Deeply affected by his era, Ricoeur attempted to retheorize a

post-war European subject that is not defined in positive terms. Scott-Baumann states that "Ricoeur adapted [the] model of the negative for modern existential use, in which the human is the centre, not God." (Scott-Baumann 2019:133) Ricoeur's hermeneutic understanding of negation is motivated by his desire to understand the modern death of religion. He questions, in a Nietzschean way, the loss of the god of morality and thus can open us a door to now question the loss of the moral subject itself. In many ways, post-humanism is a return to God, but it is a return to God without the similarities and the strong collective consciousness that characterized the God of pre-modern, highly religious societies as theorized by Durkheim (1985). Since Ricoeur proposes a way of conceptualizing God after its death, his writings can be analyzed to understand a diverse subject in a world where God (Nature) makes a reappearance.

Second, early in my readings, I decided that I wanted to question Ricoeur's potential contribution to contemporary debates in social theory. It is for this simple reason that I stumbled upon the *material turn* and various associated new materialisms. Although the connection between Ricoeur and new materialism is somewhat accidental, I believe that it will always at least be thematically appropriate to challenge his thought with up-and-coming theories. Indeed, the French philosopher is especially renowned for his reconciliatory approach (Kearney 2004). Even if considered a post-structuralist, Ricoeur is rarely as destructive as his contemporaries such as Derrida or Foucault. As a dialectic thinker, Ricoeur never disqualifies, he always seeks out new theories to oppose his own and open a new dialogue. For him, there is never a direct route and he will never shy away from standpoints that seem completely opposite to his own. In introducing his book on Ricoeur's encounters with his contemporaries, Johann Michel states that Ricoeur is not an advocate of a "philosophy of the *tabula rasa"* (2013:xvii), a philosophy that elides or outright

rejects canonized texts. Ricoeur's approach is always constructive. It is thus somewhat fitting to challenge Ricoeur with new materialism which can definitely be defined as a philosophy of the *tabula rasa* (Rekret 2018). Maybe Ricoeur can help us temper the destruction many see in new materialism similarly to how he sought out to temper his contemporaries. However, since, again, new materialism is generally rather destructive and not mediatory, I will not try to theorize how Ricoeur's thought can influence it but rather the opposite. According to Michel, Ricoeur "turned his confrontation with structuralism into a challenge" (2013:xviii) and I will attempt, in a similar fashion, to challenge Ricoeur's hermeneutics with a new materialist thinker.

Even though, as I have argued, Ricoeur is thematically appropriate for the challenge I propose, there are still some fundamental differences that will make this an arduous exercise. Ricoeur remains faithful to the enlightenment tradition of reasoning in search for truths as he makes clear in *Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: I*: "I do not in the least abandon the tradition of rationality that has animated philosophy since the Greeks." (Ricoeur [1974]2007f:296). He also argues in a later essay, that philosophy is entirely concerned by the human, by defining human beings as *selves* and separating them from other animals, objects and structures (Ricoeur 1988). Always engaged in the dialogue between philosophy and human sciences, Ricoeur's philosophy sets the foundations of human sciences by tackling "[s]uch notions as basic particulars, self-reference, agency, imputation, and responsibility" (1988:215). In the contemporary debates I will address, these notions are being carried away from anthropocentric and Eurocentric thought. This distance will always be present, and I will have to address it in a meaningful way, but for now, I will leave these problems unresolved.

As a closing remark, I would argue that just as the self understands itself through its interpretation of its others, Ricoeur's philosophy develops itself through its encounters with its philosophical others. Don Ihde argues similarly by emphasizing the generosity that defines Ricoeur's philosophy: "[to] the best of my knowledge, all of Ricoeur's interpreters have recognized the extraordinary generosity he shows to all the alternative positions which he interrogates, and these positions have been many." (Ihde 1998:82) The premise of my thesis is thus that contemporary hermeneutics informed by Ricoeur's deep body of work must continue to be defined through its relation to emerging theories such as new materialism.

SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS AND CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

The analysis proposed in this thesis is anchored in two broad opposing statements.

1. This project assumes as a positive good the focus on the natural world and the disruption of the subject proposed by new materialist authors.

2. Scholars working within interpretive traditions show strong resistance to this disruption since a prioritised subject is always seen as the center of any social scientific analysis.

The following question naturally comes out of the juxtaposition of these two statements: *can hermeneutics adapt itself to an ontology that ceases to prioritise the human subject?* In this thesis I explore a potential avenue in resolving this question by using the works of Jane Bennett to justify a flattened ontology and that of Paul Ricoeur to salvage hermeneutics after the "death" of the subject.

In the first chapter, *The Challenge of Materiality*, I briefly present the foundations of new materialist thought and some of its critics. The role of this initial chapter is to present the current debate in social theory in which this thesis inserts itself. I however argue that it is preferable for me to remain on the sidelines of this debate and use it as a *challenge* for hermeneutics as I do not which to adopt a critical stance.

In the second chapter, *The Hermeneutic Recovery of the Subject*, I present what I wish to preserve: the hermeneutic subject. The subject is at the center of any attempt at interpreting the world, social or natural. All understandings of the world come from the perspective of a certain subjectivity. Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic philosophy attempts to make sense of this problem all while proposing a foundation for social sciences that goes against the model proposed by positivist sciences.

In the third chapter, *The Pre-Modern Origins of Vital Materialism,* I argue that Jane Bennett's vital materialism and her central concept of *thing-power* can be traced back to her very first publications. Bennett's early works are presented to open up a bridge between her recent theory and hermeneutics. In her first book, she analyses the dialectic of Faith and Enlightenment at the onset of modernity and develops an ethical project partly inspired by the orientation to the world of pre-modern Faith. The goal of this chapter is to bring back Bennett's theory to the point where the utilitarian ethics she critiques throughout her work took form. I suggest that it is only through such a backtracking that hermeneutics can be connected in some way to vital materialism.

The fourth and last chapter, *Interpretation, Materiality, and Subjectivity*, is an analysis anchored around Ricoeur's essay *Religion, Atheism, and Faith* (1974) in which he attempts to theorize faith in a post-religious world. Ricoeur conceptualizes a religious subject after the death of God by thinking through a new relation between self and faith. I will utilize this subject confronting a loss to integrate the agency of the natural world in the interpretive motion that defines the subject and its cultural world.

I. The Challenge of Materiality

> Subject and object give a poor approximation of thought. Thinking
> is neither a line drawn between subject and object nor a revolving of
> one around the other. Rather, thinking takes place in the relationship
> of territory and the earth. (Deleuze and Guattari [1991]1994:85)

The problem that motivates this thesis comes from the ontology of materiality that is developed throughout the material turn and its perceived incompatibility with most post-modern theories. I will dedicate this first chapter to a presentation of the overarching ideas that motivate the material turn and of some of the issues pointed out by its critics. I have loosely divided the critics I will survey in two groups: feminist and post-colonial theorists, and interpretively oriented theorists. This chapter will also serve as an anchor for the remainder of my thesis. After presenting the precise issues I am analyzing, I will attempt to insert the debate I am setting up in a larger historical and theoretical context.

WHAT IS NEW MATERIALISM?

I have quickly presented the work of Jane Bennett in the introduction, but, for many more authors, the material world/the Earth are becoming central topics in social theory. This invigorated focus on the environment most assuredly comes as a response to global ecological crises, global warming, hurricanes, floods. We are deep enough in the era of the Anthropocene to understand

that the social world cannot entirely be understood separately from the natural world. Social sciences and humanities are now scrambling to incorporate principles of geology and biology as the social is, if kept loose, on path to destroy the natural. An emerging guiding principle suggests that social justice cannot be decoupled from ecological justice.

A recent material or ontological turn turns our attention to a physical, tangible world that exists outside of our interpretations and representations of it. As a movement emerging from these turns, new materialism cannot be clearly framed and defined. Perhaps, as is the case for all emerging academic trends, it has not solidified itself in a clear body of literature and is rather sprawling in various contradictory directions. As I attempt to briefly paint a portrait of new materialism and its associated variations, I must first stress that it is difficult, and maybe inappropriate, to succinctly represent a movement that refuses to clearly define itself. In fact, a refusal of categorizing permeates new materialism. The material turn also certainly comes with important implications for all areas of social research. Theory, methodology, disciplinary boundaries and even the organisation of academic institutions itself is questioned by new materialist scholars. In this chapter, I will mostly focus on the social theory that drives the material turn[1].

[1] See Fox and Alldred's *Sociology and the New Materialism*: *theory, research, action* (2017) for a more in-depth discussion on the research methods championed by new materialist researchers.

To begin, I suggest that all recent anti-anthropocentric turns can be huddled under the umbrella of post-humanism without doing them too much violence[2]. By that, I argue that a two-stepped critique of the modern subject and of the post-modern focus on language are foundational to all the recent turns that are closely related to new materialism. I will here mostly rely on the work of Rosi Braidotti to define the post-human.

> My working definition of the posthuman predicament is the convergence, across the spectrum of cognitive capitalism, of posthumanism on the one hand and post-anthropocentrism on the other. The former focuses on the critique of the humanist ideal of 'Man' as the allegedly universal measure of all things[3], while the latter criticizes species hierarchy and human exceptionalism. (Braidotti 2019:31-32)

Post-humanism as a current of thought must be understood in a continuum where modernism (alongside humanism), post-modernism and post-humanism succeed one another. Post-humanism therefore comes from a critique of humanist principles that permeate modernism and post-

---

[2] Anne Philips (2015) loosely divides post-humanism in three groups: stark critiques of humanism (following anti-humanism), techno-futurists, and boundary breaking theorists. Jane Bennett whose work is central to this thesis would be situated in the third group. Other recent movements in philosophy that can be situated one way or another within Phillips' categories include Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (2005), Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology (2018) and Quentin Meillassoux's speculative realism (2006).

[3] Without directly citing him, Braidotti here uses the words of notable anti-enlightenment thinker Giambattista Vico. As presented before, the very first axiom of the elements of Vico's *New Science* goes as follows: "*Because of the indefinite nature of the human mind, wherever it is lost in ignorance, man makes himself the measure of all things.*" (Vico 1948:53) This is simply an anecdotal coincidence, but the use of Vico's lexicon nonetheless suggests that post-humanism is a reignition of past debates rather than a completely novel metaphysics as it is argued by Dolphijn and Van der Tuin (2012).

modernism. Our fixed comprehension of the human subject is disrupted. The post-human is a bringing-together of opposites in something other than a confrontation. It asks for a shift in imagination, a reconceptualization of all binary thinking that creates many disruptions. This assertion heavily depends on a conception of the present that is all but fixed. Braidotti asserts that the focus is never on the here and now (a stable understanding of Being) but rather on processes of becoming. The post-human subject is conceptualized in a constant state of becoming – forming a rhythm – that is itself dependent on empirically identifiable historical and geographical locations (Braidotti 2019:35). This motion defines the post-human rather than some essence present in the subject itself. Braidotti and other post-human scholars thus conceptualize subjects as "knowing subjects" (2019:39). Since it is conceptualized in constant motion, the post-human is studied in action. The action of "knowing" defines the subject rather than the other way around.

Like many authors concerned by ecological matters, Braidotti argues that there is a "moral panic" (2019:35) for the future of the human as a species[4]. But she counters by stating that posthumanities see beyond such eschatological discourses and aim at being productive by opening

---

[4] Here, it is important to note that posthumanities are also founded on a critique of singularitarian trans-humanists who are focused on the more-than-human. Notable singularitarians include academic institutions such as The Oxford Institute for the Future of Humanity led by Nick Bostrom or corporate organizations such as Ray Kurzweil's Singularity University. Braidotti argues that these organizations reproduce the values of the enlightenment and believe in the supremacy of Man by working on post-man as an enhanced version of the central being. From this perspective that is very much informed by a Hegelian understanding of history (Fukuyama 1989), the bettering of the world has to come from a continuous enhancement of human capacities based on ultimate ideals such as transnational capitalism and Western liberal democracy.

our understanding of the present human condition. The posthuman is not charged with assumptions of any kind regarding the past or the future of humanity, it is according to Braidotti, "normatively neutral and it does not automatically point to the end of the species" (Braidotti 2019:35).

In a broad stroke, Braidotti (2019) paints a portrait of the rise of post-humanist thought through a survey of contemporary philosophies of the generalized Other. In essence, feminist, queer, race and subaltern studies alongside all associated 'studies' of the Other in Western thought participate in creating momentum for a movement that expels the singular human from the center of our imagination. Eco-feminist Vandana Shiva aptly proclaimed this generalized movement away from Man to be "the end of the 'monocultures of the mind'" (as cited in Braidotti 2019:38). New materialism presents itself as one of the many post-humanist currents that participates in this still ongoing democratization of knowledge production.

Dolphijn and Van der Tuin (2012) introduce their book on new materialism by arguing that as a current of thought, it represents the birth a new metaphysics. For the authors, a new metaphysics is nothing new, it is made up of re-readings and novel interpretations of various canonized classical texts. In other words, a new metaphysics has always been there; its tradition as always existed, it simply gets spotlighted by contemporary authors. A new way of reading the canon establishes a novel thinking process that is seen as more appropriate for the era in which the canon is now read. That is to say that if the works of Deleuze and Guattari[5] are often seen as the bedrock of new

---

[5] Although Deleuze and Guattari themselves are not considered new materialists, their writings are extensively cited by the most prominent new materialist scholars.

materialism, it is not because they invented a new way of conceptualizing thought through its relationship with the world, but rather because they pointed out that a certain way of thinking has always existed and that it should now be taken into account.

Social theories informed by this new metaphysics move away from social constructionism to further distance the human being from the center of our thought. The physical and natural world are given an agency that is equivalent to that of humans. Gamble, Hanan and Nail state that "[t]he common motivation for this "materialist turn" is a perceived neglect or diminishment of matter in the dominant Euro-Western tradition as a passive substance intrinsically devoid of meaning." (2019:111) Similarly, Fox and Alldred (2018) refer to the material turn as the 'turn to matter', this wording emphasizes the concrete, practical focus on matter and its agentic capacities. I would argue that a historical neglect of matter is however not the most important motivating factor behind new materialism; it is rather, like all post-humanist thinking, the desire to move the human away from its central position in our thought. The ethical agenda of reducing the supremacy of the human is what leads to an increased recognition of matter because it can be seen as encompassing every single element – human or not – that can be included in the analysis of an event. Socially constructed realities are no longer a priority since they can first be theorized as material constructions. In other words, new materialists deal with concrete productive forces instead of focusing on social construction and reproduction. Both in their analyses and in the desired outcome of their research, new materialist scholars prioritize productive processes rather than constructions that pertain to human thought. In what follows, Dolphijn and Van der Tuin (2012) compare this approach to one that would be informed by the linguistic turn in philosophy for the analysis of a piece of art.

> After a short description of the materials used following a "crude materialism," the contemporary scholar influenced by the so-called "linguistic turn" proceeds to deconstruct its messages. New materialism allows for the study of the two dimensions in their entanglement: the experience of a piece of art is made up of matter and meaning. The material dimension creates and gives form to the discursive, and vice versa. Similar to what happens with the artwork, new materialism sets itself to rewriting events that are usually only of interest to natural scientists. (91)

Nature and culture cannot be considered separately under new materialism, they are both inter-connected diverse entities that need to be analyzed as such. Following this, a plethora of other dualisms that have always defined philosophical inquiry are eradicated. Among these are the often-cited oppositions of mind/meaning, body/matter, and the surface/base dualism at the foundation of 'old school' historical materialism (Fox and Alldred 2017:13-14). New materialism is thus characterized by a *monist* approach and an ontology of immanence that seek to flatten all binary oppositions for they are seen as being always hierarchical (Bennett 2012; Dolphijn and Van der Tuin 2012; Fox and Alldred 2018). For new materialist thinkers, there is no individual thing – person or object – to which we should give priority. An individual and the society or group they are a part of are both valid objects that coexist and that we should acknowledge as such. As an example, Harman states that "[t]here is no reason to think that individual French soldiers are more real than the whole divisions of them that saw action at the Marne in 1914." (2015:129) To add to that example, new materialist thinkers will also value the impact of the tools used by the soldiers, the soil on which they fought, and the weather during September of 1914 in Northern France. All of these elements form an agentic assemblage or an agentic network in which every element must be considered. In the same vein, Manuel De Landa (2018) argues against the use of grouping terms such as "the State" and promotes the use of multiples instead of simply using a vocabulary that

points to averages. The focus on multiplicity brought by Harman and De Landa also results in an increased valuation of the natural world in the social sciences. Similarly, in discussing Bruno Latour's contribution to this movement, Jane Bennett argues that "[n]ature has always mixed it up with self and society, but Latour notes that lately this co-mingling has intensified and become harder to ignore." (Bennett 2010:115)

As I alluded to earlier, new materialists are usually opposed to strict categorizations, and I would argue that they carry this sentiment in the heuristic devices they promote. For instance, critical cartographies, a theoretical tool often used by new materialist authors, embody the fluidity and specificity of new materialist knowledge production and its focus on creativity and transversality (Dolphjin and Van der Tuin 2012; Braidotti 2019). Critical cartographies are geographically, politically, and epistemically situated. For that reason, many prefer referring to the movement using the plural form "new materialisms" (Dolphjin and Van der Tuin 2012; Gamble, Hanan and Nail 2019; Alldred and Fox 2020). Every single form of new materialism has its own specific aims and foundations, they cannot all be described by a single method. Mapping exercises become widely used because they can encompass locations, knowledges, and methods in varying ways. Laid flat on a table, a map does not present any specific starting point in the conceptualization of a journey. The problem of discovering the world can be solved from any given coordinate. Any location can be approached from various routes. In a similar way post-human knowledges aspire to subvert and flatten any top-down approach – hence a monist ontology – and consequently democratize the production of scientific knowledge. Braidotti goes as far as saying that "footnotes and bibliographies [are] the expression of democracy in the text" (19:33).

A wide array of sources from many disconnected fields show that the boundaries of knowledge can be pushed in endless creative ways.

Critical cartographies in geography stem from the assertion that the act of mapping – just like critique – and its history are inherently political. Cartographies are analyzed as political tools through which power and knowledge are reproduced. Geographers Jeremy Crampton and John Krygier (2006) explain that Foucault's definition of knowledge as being historically specific grounds a critique of mapping practices and provides us with the analytical tools to understand them as political instruments (13-14). Foucault's insistence on the spatiality of knowledge is also of noteworthy importance for geographers. Critical cartographies are thus creative tools used to re-imagine both landscapes and bodies of knowledge. Such mapping can then simultaneously take the form of an academic exercise, a performance and an act of resistance. Braidotti (2019) argues that critical cartographies form a pillar of post-humanist thought. Since knowledge and subjectivities are not understood as singular and fixed points, they become defined by the different continuous motions that form them. Braidotti mentions that her cartographies focus on questions such as "what kind of knowing subjects are we in the process of becoming and what discourses underscore the process." (Braidotti 2019:32) These questions become central to any inquiry as they suggest that subjectivity is better found through a cartographic exercise than through hermeneutic or phenomenological research focused on individual experiences. Post-humanist thought rejects any form of immanent subjectivity but present subjects that are "immanent to specific conditions" (Braidotti 2019:34). The post-human subject is conceptualized in a constant state of becoming that is itself dependent on empirically identifiable historical, geographical, and epistemological locations. As it is theorized in Latour's *Reassembling the Social* (2005), a work

that is considered foundational to many new materialists, the word 'social' itself needs to be rethought. Latour argues that, as an adjective, "social" should be used to designate a process, a form of movement rather than an object (1-9).

Now that I have presented the basic tenets of new materialist thought, I think it is important to present some of its main critics. The criticism I present in the following section will allow me to situate the analysis that will be put forward in this thesis.

CRITICS OF NEW MATERIALISM

Although a generalized environmental crisis is acknowledged by most, there is a visible unease to engage with theories emerging from the material turn. If not necessarily in writing, I think it is fair to say that many academics trained in social constructionist traditions are voicing a certain form of pessimism towards post-human theories in classrooms, seminars, meetings, and corridor discussions. In my experience, these remarks go from "I think it is important, but I am not the appropriate person to discuss these turns" to "these new theories are all rubbish". In what follows I will briefly present various points of criticism that are commonly laid out when academics take the time to explain their disagreement with new materialism.

A first basic critique of post-humanist thought operates at the semantic or argumentative level. Critics of new materialism will often attack it on the basis that it positions itself above critique. It might in fact be too easy for a new materialist thinker to point out that its critics simply cannot

move away from an anthropocentric point of view and that their concerns are symptomatic of a deeply ingrained anthropocentrism. Sara Ahmed (2008) mentions this problem as she discusses the new materialist belief that feminism and post-modernism defend an anti-biology standpoint by being too focused on the emancipation of female subjectivity and not enough on bodily realities: "one of the effects of [the] routinization of the critique of anti-biologism is that the critique of this critique risks being read as symptomatic of anti-biologism." (25) In other words, as Ahmed remarks that new materialists often label feminism as being anti-biology, she appears herself as a stark defender of an anti-biology standpoint even if she simply asks for a prioritization of subjectivity. In this example, the new materialist focus on biology over subjectivity represents their prioritization of materiality over socially constructed realities. Now, this unending loop of criticism is one that can hardly be escaped when dealing with any anti-anthropocentric theory, because all theorizing will inevitably be presented from an anthropocentric point of view. It will be a challenge for this thesis to remain out of this loop. My primary strategy for doing so will be to approach the novelties brought by new materialism as challenges that can be read alongside other theories rather than as totalizing critiques. In order to discuss in more depth precise points of criticism past the simple semantic level, I have divided critics in two inappropriately broad categories. In the two following subsections, I present critics coming from a feminist and post-colonial standpoint, and critics whose work is broadly grounded in interpretive theories informed by the linguistic turn in philosophy.

Feminist and Post-Colonial Critics

> There is something haunting to me about the fact that I lean on contemporary feminist new materialist discourse to account for the fact that the body is not and has never been singular. Something haunting about the fact that the non-singularity of the body, its vital entanglements with other kinds of bodies, was once so obvious across cultures, geographies, and histories that it didn't need to be argued. Something changed, something *was* changed. A monumental worldview swept in and tried – with brute force, with discipline, with pedagogy – to make us each one self. But there is a prolific past that tells a different story of the body as an infinite collection of bodyings. And the grand historical force of producing the singular self has made these pasts difficult to gather, difficult to archive." (Singh 2018:31-32)

In this citation Julietta Singh discusses a concept she calls the *body archive*, a way of building knowledge through an understanding of bodies and their histories. Asking questions about the current state of specific bodies can inform us on the various social structures that reproduce their forms and behaviours. Modernity's focus on the self and the mind must be set aside to give place to research focused on bodies. Without specifically criticizing new materialist ontologies, Singh remarks that she is naturally inclined to use new materialist thought in trying to move away from an attitude "that emerges from a specific place (Europe) at a specific time (modernity)" (2018: 31) instead of referencing non-Western traditions that have never ceased valuing the materiality of the body. Singh's observation suggest that there is an incongruity in the new materialist critique of modernity because it attempts to neglect Eurocentric traditions with a novel Eurocentric tradition.

In an article first published as a blogpost that echoes Singh's thoughts, anthropologist Zoe Todd describes her experience in the attendance of a conference on materialist agency led by Bruno

Latour. The anthropologist writes that in Latour's presentation she recognized many familiar theories and concepts that reminded her of long-established Indigenous epistemologies. Todd rightfully reminds us that Indigenous thinkers have always worked with and through nature. While the environment is just currently being re-introduced in mainstream scholarship, it has always been an integral element in Indigenous thought. Todd, naturally anticipated that Latour would, in his presentation, reference some of the Indigenous traditions she was reminded of as he lectured. She describes her anticipation as follows:

> I waited. I waited, with baited breath, as I do through most of these types of events in the UK—waited to hear a whisper of the lively and deep intellectual traditions borne out in Indigenous Studies departments, community halls, fish camps, classrooms, band offices and Friendship Centres across Turtle Island (North America) right now. (Todd 2016:7)

The anticipated references never came. Latour presented many western authors, but Indigenous scholarships were not given the credit of having prioritized the material environment and its entanglements with social life before anyone else.

> And again, the ones we credited for these incredible insights into the 'more-than-human', sentience and agency, and the ways through which to imagine our 'common cosmopolitical concerns' were not the people who built and maintain the knowledge systems that European and North American anthropologists and philosophers have been studying for well over a hundred years, and predicating many of their current 'aha' ontological moments (or re-imaginings of the discipline) upon. (Todd 2016:7-8)

Todd argues the problem she encountered at Latour's conference is deeply rooted in academia, it is not an issue inherent to post-humanist circles, but it is one that they do not consider while pretending to live by a superior ethical agenda. The structural mechanisms in place in academia

facilitate the reappropriation of any form of knowledge and make Western universities their nexus while the true roots of these knowledge traditions are erased or simply ignored (Todd 2016:8). Post-humanist scholars reproduce this structural issue by positing themselves as the sole originators of their theories. As an example, Todd observes that in their effort to negate universalisms, post-humanists make the mistake of assuming that certain ways of thinking – such as the modern prioritization of mind over body – are in fact universal without duly considering the many alternative traditions that already exist (2016:15). Todd's own work stands as an example of scholarship that challenges anthropocentrism and the hegemony of the human mind without falling under the label of post-humanism. For instance, in a recent article, she analyzes human-fish relations in Northern Canada as a corollary to decolonization efforts within the Canadian legal framework (2014).

If Singh and Todd's reactions to new materialism may be seen as anecdotal, Sara Ahmed (2018) looks at the turn to matter in a more purely theoretical manner. In her oft-cited critique, she argues that new-materialist ontologies emerged as a reductionist critique of feminism's lack of attention to matter. Ahmed observes that it is the belief that feminism has become strictly social constructionist and anti-biology, thus impeding the exploration of issues which are not socially constructed, that has opened the door to new materialism (26-29). She also states that new-materialist theories are presented as necessary evolutions to a stale feminism that stopped paying attention to biological matters (24). This attitude, presented as a founding gesture, is for Ahmed "a forgetting as well as a caricature." (Ahmed 2008:36)

> Given the feminist concern with understanding how gender and
> sexuality are reproduced in time and space, a key emphasis has been

placed on language, culture, the symbolic, labour, discourse and ideology. This is because feminism needs a theory of social reproduction; of how particular forms become norms over time. But it does not follow that feminists don't then believe that the material world exists, or that feminist theory cannot admit to the materiality of things. If anything, given the concern with the social reproduction of hierarchies, much feminist work might point to the complexity of the relationship between materiality and culture, rather than reducing one to the other. (Ahmed 2008:33)

Of particular importance in this cited paragraph is the "need" for a theory of social reproduction. Here, it is apparent that for Ahmed feminism cannot completely move away from constructionism. I would argue that Ahmed's statement extends past feminism and covers all human and social sciences. In fact, the most common classical and contemporary justifications given for social sciences precisely analyze and critique mechanisms of social reproduction. This point of contention is also shared by the critics that I will present in the next section. The need for tools to understand how social formations are reproduced bring us back to the relation between subject and object. The concepts mentioned by Ahmed – "language, culture, the symbolic, labour, discourse, and ideology" – are constructed as tools for the critical scholar who seeks emancipation from restrictive, violent social norms. It is thus, following Ahmed's understanding of social sciences, always in the relationship between these socially constructed tools or objects and the subject who seeks emancipation that the critique finds its roots.

Ultimately, authors like Singh, Todd and Ahmed are pointing out that a subject survives the material turn, a knowledge producing subject that remains protected. In other words, the appearance of throwing away the subject in fact solidifies and conceals a modern colonial subject which continues to blur out indigenous and other non-Western thought. For Todd, "[w]hen we cite

European thinkers who discuss the 'more-than-human' but do not discuss their Indigenous contemporaries who are writing on the exact same topics, we perpetuate the white supremacy of the academy." (2016:18) Essentially, when authors such as Rosi Braidotti argue that "the 'posthuman' is normatively neutral" (2019:35) without questioning the knowledge producing subjects and institutions that puts forward this claim, they produce the mirage of a neutral ontology via an unquestioned and biased epistemology. The subject is always institutionalized and attempting to erase it without first addressing epistemic issues deeply rooted at the institutional level will simply have the effect of perpetuating these very issues. Todd consequently tempers her criticism by acknowledging that post-humanist practices can serve decolonial endeavours insofar as they are performed alongside an institutional critique that could lead to structural changes (2018:16-18). But as Ahmed argues, such an institutional critique must be founded on a subject for emancipation. In sum, post-colonial critics of new materialism may agree with the the ethical stance chased by new materialist scholars, but they argue that it should be rooted in a critique of Eurocentric subjectivity rather than in our collective neglect of matter.

Interpretively Oriented Critics

Another common critique of new materialism and one that motivates this thesis is the fear of the loss of a moral subject. This fear can be seen in almost reactionary criticisms of new materialism such as Benjamin Boysen's (2018) who declares that new materialism results in *The Embarrassment of Being Human.* Boysen claims that new materialist thinkers are victims of *semiophobia* or a fear of acknowledging that the human world is mostly grounded in language.

For him, the move away from language and the "emphasis on material assemblages jeopardizes the ontological capacities that we normally associate with agency." (Boysen 2018:226) The agentic subject is thus partly or even entirely erased since language and signs are seen as tainted representation of the world that impede our access to matter. The rejection of being a subject as the primary marker of the human condition equates for Boysen to a negation of humanity. Accordingly, sociologists may view this loss of a clearly defined subject as a rejection of sociology as a whole for "sociology, since its origins in the 19th century, can be considered the science centered on the decentered subject." (Keller 2019:157) To summarize the impacts of this loss, I will here focus on the work of Rainer Keller who succinctly summarizes various points of criticism developed from the interpretive point of view of the sociology of knowledge.

Keller (2019) acknowledges the need to pay increased attention to the role of matter in social matters but argues that a whole new metaphysics is not needed to do so. In the following, he argues that hidden in the pretension of developing a new way of thinking is a generalized ignorance of specific traditions that have fruitfully informed social scientific research for decades.

> Given the heterogeneity of the main protagonists of [new materialism], it is hard to address them with a few general arguments. But it does seem that all of them have in common a far reaching ignorance vis-à-vis sociology in general, and its traditions (like interpretive sociology) and specialties (e.g., medical sociology, sociology of the body, and sciences and technology studies). Authors of new materialism and linked turns like to present generalized arguments about all the failures and voids of empirical social research, e.g., when addressing harsh critiques to "social constructivism" as a "representational mode of thinking" without giving concrete references to statements or texts. (Keller 2019:152)

In his paper, Keller cynically calls the issue of an unnecessary novel metaphysics in new materialist empirical research *Deleuze goes research*. According to this criticism, while trying to present themselves as radical theorists, new materialist researchers may have the tendency to simply include a vague theoretical section shallowly referencing Deleuze and Guattari at the beginning of their articles and then precede to present and analyze their data in no different way a social constructionist researcher would. Accordingly, the biggest issue with new materialism does not necessarily lie in its practice, but rather in the preliminary claims it makes. New materialists may pay particular attention to a greater variety of agencies in their analyses which is not something that is critiqued; the problem is rather in the claim that this new variety of agencies can be understood from a "pure", non-anthropocentric point of view. In his assessment of new materialists' particular focus on human-materiality relations, Keller writes,

> In principle, there is nothing wrong with this, as long as the account does not claim to be a pure and true account of intra-action or agency between objects and humans or other beings, uncontaminated by involvement, interpretation, and even affect. (2019: 159)

Keller thus asserts that humans cannot get away from the process of interpretation. Although he argues that sociology always makes use of a decentred subject, he maintains that external agencies—living or non-living—can only be understood via our interpretations of them.

Having presented two sources of criticism that both question the erasure of the subject, I want to establish a productive way of inserting my own analysis in this debate. I do not wish to pursue the path of the harsher critics seen in this section. In dealing with theoretical novelties, I prefer taking a stance such as Keller's which asks: "[h]ow can we deal with questions of the material in

sociology in a more explicit and reflexive way?" (Keller 2019:157) My approach will be that of viewing the material turn as a *challenge* rather than approaching it from a critical point of view. To question materiality's effects on subjectivity my analysis needs to be hinged on an element of congruity. I will argue that this element can be found in new materialists reliance on pre-modern discourses to critique modernity, and in their conception of matter as an epistemological limit or as a divine – unreachable – entity.

New materialism's focus on ontology at the price of various epistemological traditions is considered a setback for its critics. The neglect of modernity's characteristic pursuit of universal scientific knowledge evokes for many a return to pre-modern discourses and their heavy reliance on theology. Boysen for example states that the "reduction of human agency to thing agency, is executed by means of a quasi-religious and premodern discourse." (2018:226) Making a similar observation, Žižek asks: "are we effectively dealing with a strong ontological claim asserting a kind of spiritualism without gods, with a way of restoring sacredness to worldliness?" (2014:11) Following this open question, Žižek compares new materialisms view of the world to Middle-Earth, the fictional world of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, where the material world is seen as being full of a quasi-magical vitality but does not have Gods. The Slovenian writer points out that in Tolkien's work, "all magic is immanent to matter, as a spiritual power that dwells in our terrestrial world" (2014:14). This spiritual power is thus unnameable, humans are at its mercy. If I may take a similar approach and look at vitality as a source of magic in another fantasy universe, the archipelago imagined by Ursula K. Le Guin in her *Earthsea* series represents a world where all vitality is accessible to human control. In this series, mages, witches and sorcerers control wind, fire, earth, monsters, and all types of objects by uttering their true names. True names are concealed

but can be discovered through the scholarly work of the most brilliant minds on the archipelago whose stated mission is "finding out the names of things, and finding out how to find out the names of things." (Le Guin 212:130) In this world dominated by the power of linguistics, we could say that interpretation – or hermeneutics – becomes the ultimate human tool to control the material environment. Contrarily to Middle-Earth, in the anthropocentric Earthsea, humans do not face any epistemological limit, everything has a true name to be discovered. Earthly spiritual powers are not out of reach they can be named and tamed. These two magical worlds, taken as metaphors for social sciences, offer us two contradictory ways of seeing the role of the social scientist. In the former, scientists are confronted with the unlimited mystery of the world and its self-regulating force. In the latter, scientists have the outspoken objective of mastering the world by conceiving their own mind as a carrying vessel for all knowledge. It is, in essence, these two attitudes that I will be trying to reconcile in this thesis.

The previous sections on post-humanism and its critiques also remind us of the historical context briefly presented in the introduction in which the debate between two alternative visions of social sciences inscribe itself. Post-humanism presents itself as a continuation of post-modern ontologies by a complete flattening of the relation of the subject to its environment. However, post-modern critiques of post-humanism – such as Ahmed – suggest that a certain form of a centralized subject is still necessary in a world that continues to be structured according to the vision of modernity. The following is a visual representation of these contrasting visions.

Figure 1: Ontologies (Humanity, itself, and the world)

Cogito

Material World

1. Modernism   2. Postmodernism   3. Posthumanism
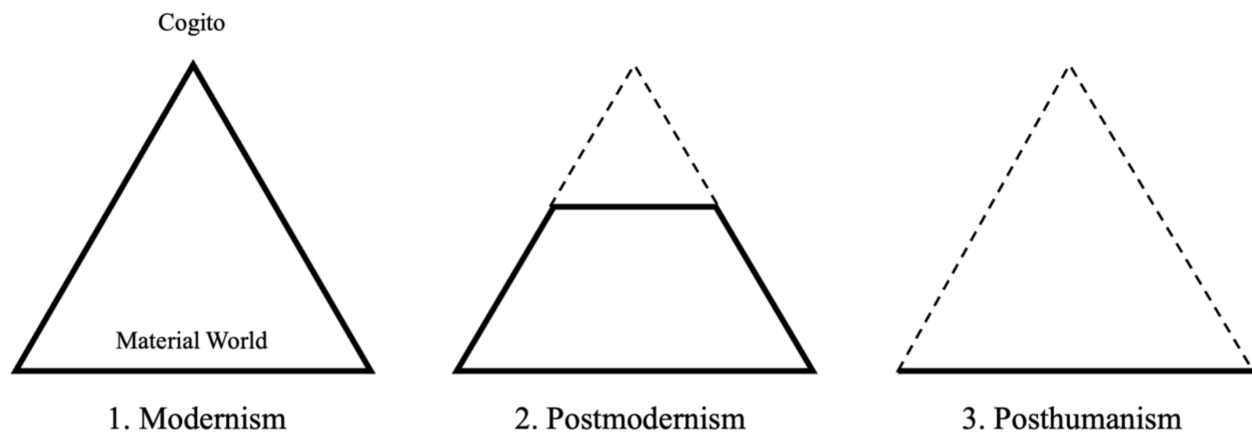
The summit of the triangles represents the point of view of a single human subject, and the bottom of the triangles represents the material world. The bolded lines represent the vision of each current of thought, and the dotted lines represent contemporary social reality. Modernism proposes a worldview where a single subject is hierarchically above everything else and from whose vantage point all form of analysis finds its beginning. Then, post-modernism critiques this approach by partly flattening the summit to include a wide variety of human subjects in its analyses. And finally, post-humanism proposes a completely flattened ontology where humanity is equivalent to materiality.

As I said previously in this chapter, most contemporary social theorists agree that an invigorated focus on the natural world is becoming more than necessary, however there is an important disagreement on how this focus should be ontologically implemented. From Figure 1, I argue that the distance between post-modernism and post-humanism is in the relation of each conceptualization of social science to actual social reality. The post-humanist focus on the material

world is necessary to better understand our relation to our natural environment and to technology, but at the same time the post-modern focus on diverse subjectivities is necessary in a world that largely remains structured around Eurocentric interpretations. The challenge that I propose here is to find a way to meaningfully account for these two realities by adding a focus on the material world to an interpretive theory that preserves a diverse human subject. This connection will be possible solely through the fact that both theories find commonality in their critique of modernity.

In sum, in a very simplistic way modernity is characterized by a strengthening of the subject, and post-modernism displaces and questions this subject to explode its shackles and render it visible in all its diversities. Despite this fundamental difference, both eras are primarily defined by a strong focus on subjectivity and its meaning. Now, following the ontological or material turn, we see a clear step in another direction. Whether this step is motivated by the aspirations for scientific rigour of the science and technology studies or by the ethical and ecological agenda of vital materialism, it remains an ontological statement that puts the subject in an uncertain place. This blurred subject confronted with various epistemological limits is what I set out to investigate in the following chapters. I will hereafter focus solely on Jane Bennett's vital materialism to explicate how the subject-object relationship is disturbed by post-humanist thought.

After having presented the foundations of new materialism, I presented a cog around which my analysis will unfurl itself. The post-human subject is understood as facing a natural world that is beyond its epistemological grasp. As it is argued by Žižek and Boysen, understood as such the natural world takes a divine form. Post-humanism in that sense represents a religious or spiritual revival in social theory. This return to pre-modern philosophies that is used as a point of critique

by many can serve as an anchor for the purpose of my analysis. I will return to this more clearly in chapter three. When attempting to compare, contrast or connect various theories it is important, as suggested by Everett C. Hughes, to search for "*likeness within the shell of variety*" (cited in Swedberg 2012:32) and here I propose that the Divine understood simply as an epistemological limit represents this element of likeness. It is thus by defining a subject confronting an epistemologically unattainable element that we will be able to connect the post-human subject facing (divine) nature to the hermeneutic subject.

II.   The Hermeneutic Recovery of the Subject

> We suddenly arrive, as it were, in the middle of a conversation
> which has already begun and in which we try to orient ourselves in
> order to be able to contribute to it.
> (Ricoeur [1981]2016c:69)

Paul Ricoeur's oeuvre is colossal to say the least. The first challenge for anyone analyzing his works is to narrow down an area of interest. For this thesis, it will be important to find a point at which his works can be connected in some way to new materialism. Like many prolific authors, Ricoeur's publications are often divided in different eras that correspond to the philosophical questions he is asking. His hermeneutic thought alone is usually divided in two steps: the interpretation of symbols mostly developed in *The Symbolism of Evil* (1969), and then, the dialectic of explanation and understanding. In his earlier publications, Ricoeur was strictly working within phenomenology by trying to mediate the works of Edmund Husserl and Gabriel Marcel (Ricoeur 2013). It is in writing *The Symbolism of Evil* that he saw a middle step through textual analysis as imposing itself to his philosophy of the self. In his own words, he needed to account for "the 'historical' mediation of the cultural world." (2013:4) This added step led Ricoeur into a critique of phenomenology: his philosophy remained fundamentally about the recovery of subjective experiences, but it decentered the subject through a detour via the analysis of language. In this first introduction of hermeneutics to his philosophy, Ricoeur was however solely concerned with the interpretation of double-meanings hidden inside symbols such as myths and poems. Although he was already envisioning a much broader application of the hermeneutical method before the 1960s,

his critique of phenomenology remained at the level of symbols containing a hidden surplus of meaning that makes the recovery of subjective experience impossible directly through eidetic analysis. It is "the double shock of structuralism and psychoanalysis" (2013:6) he encountered during the early 1960s that pushed Ricoeur to broaden his hermeneutic philosophy. This turn in Ricoeur's thought coincides with the wider linguistic turn in philosophy as language became for him an obligatory mediator in any self-understanding. It is in this second hermeneutic period that precedes Ricoeur's move to the United States that he most clearly fleshes out his understanding of the human subject.

Out of these two early hermeneutic periods comes out what is often understood as the key to all of Ricoeur's works, that is the subject mediated by the universe of signs (Ihde 1971; Roberge 2008). Since, this hermeneutic subject is what I attempt to challenge but preserves in this thesis, I will focus on condensed works in which Ricoeur presents the core tenets of this theory. I focus on these periods where Ricoeur's thought deviated from phenomenology through a conceptualization of a decentered hermeneutic subject since as seen in the first chapter (summarized in *Figure 1*) new materialist ontologies are defined by a complete flattening of the subject's relation to the material world. The decentered hermeneutic subject can thus potentially be seen as a middle step between the direct access to subjective experience theorized in phenomenology and the flattened ontology of new materialism. For this reason, I rely on *The Conflict of Interpretations* ([1974] 2007), a collection of essays Ricoeur wrote to accompany *Freud and Philosophy* (1970), his monograph on Freud and psychoanalysis. I read *The Conflict of Interpretations*, initially published in French in 1969, as the culminating point of Ricoeur's two significant hermeneutic periods that

span the second half of the fifties and the entire sixties. This chapter takes the form of a summary of Ricoeur hermeneutic subject as a foundation for interpretative social sciences.

The roots of the modern subject are found in Descartes's *cogito* which represents a certainty, an unquestionable basis for all knowledge. Ricoeur and all of contemporary hermeneutics is primarily concerned with a destabilization of this strong base. What hermeneutics will eventually show is that the subject is never given and that it has to be conceptualized as a fractious entity. The epigraph of the present chapter can be read as a condensed expression of the hermeneutic subject: the self is constantly trying to orient itself in a cultural world understood as an ongoing conversation without ever being able to fully complete that task. Ricoeur's contribution to the philosophy of social science is grounded in a double step of this destructive ontology coming out of his reading of Heidegger, and then of a reconstructive epistemology of interpretation. Initially, the self is bewildered, lost in the face of the social and cultural world, and then the dialogue between hermeneutic philosophy and social science can provide a link between the self and an analysis of its cultural surroundings through which the self can partly be recovered. A hermeneutic philosophy provides the reflexivity necessary to understand the self as a subject in opposition to the objects of science. I will further define these steps in the following sections.

THE DECENTERED SUBJECT

In Ricoeur's reading of Husserl and Heidegger we can find the roots of the theory that leads him to conceptualize the *cogito* as understanding itself through the interpretations of worldly signs.

This move brings in a multitude of interrogations that bring the *self* at the fore front of any interpretation. Ricoeur offers what is commonly referred to as the long way to recovering the *cogito* as opposed to the shorter route offered by Heidegger with the analytic of Dasein. This longer route which Ricoeur himself refers to as "the great detour via signs" has to be understood as a proposed method of analysis in which interpretive social sciences insert themselves. In the introduction of *Being and Time* (1962), Heidegger famously states that the question of being has been neglected in the entire history of philosophy. The German philosopher states that "'Being is the most universal and the emptiest of concepts", and that "[a]s such it resists every attempt at definition." (Heidegger 21) The great misconception is in thinking that the notion of Being – and of the self – is a clear concept when in fact it is "the darkest of all." (Heidegger 23) In response to the problem of Being, Ricoeur argues that Heidegger develops his ontology in a simple reversal of the question of understanding. In Ricoeur words, "[i]nstead of asking: On what condition can a knowing subject understand a text or history? one asks: What kind of being it is whose being consists of understanding? The hermeneutic problem thus becomes a problem of the Analytic of this being, Dasein, which exists through understanding." (Ricoeur [1974] 2007a:6) This simple reversal of the question of being replaces "the consideration of a mode of being for that of a mode of knowing" ([1974]2007a Ricoeur:19). Ricoeur does not want to oppose his own theory to Heidegger's, instead he wants to use the Heideggerian ontology of understanding as an inspiration, almost as a target or ultimate destination for his own epistemology of interpretation. In other words, Ricoeur does not want to make a choice between ontology and epistemology. Instead, he wants to show how a constructive epistemology of interpretation can unfold itself towards the recovery of a rather destructive ontology of understanding. He presents this inquiry as follows.

> My problem will be exactly this: what happens to an epistemology
> of interpretation born of a reflection on exegesis, on the method of
> history, on psychoanalysis, on the phenomenology of religion, etc.,
> when it is touched, animated, and, as we might say, inspired by an
> ontology of understanding? (Ricoeur [1974]2007a:7)

With Heidegger, understanding becomes the primary marker of Being. Following this logic,

understanding is no longer an epistemological question nested in the Kantian subject-object

relationship and through which the limits and the possibilities of knowledge are established. The

question of understanding rather becomes an existential one as it is posited as what defines the

existence of the being who's understanding is under study. Ricoeur acknowledges that this reversal

is radical and, at the same time, extremely powerful. It is this injection of an existential level to

the question of understanding that opens the possibility to develop hermeneutics in a proper

philosophy of the self or of self-interpretation. Ricoeur, however, argues that a reflexive element

must be added to the ontology of understanding that he theorized through his reading of Heidegger.

> In proposing to relate symbolic language to self-understanding, I
> think I fulfill the deepest wish of hermeneutics. The purpose of all
> interpretation is to conquer a remoteness, a distance between the
> past cultural epoch to which the text belongs and the interpreter
> himself. By overcoming this distance, by making himself
> contemporary with the text, the exegete can appropriate its meaning
> to himself: foreign, he makes it familiar, that is, he makes it his own.
> It is thus the growth of his own understanding of himself that he
> pursues through his understanding of the other. Every hermeneutics
> is thus, explicitly or implicitly, self-understanding by means of
> understanding others. (Ricoeur [1974]2007a:16-17)

The injection of hermeneutics as a philosophy that is fundamentally about the recovery of the

self adds a new constructive element to the critique of the *cogito*. Ricoeur acknowledges that

Descartes' project is a valid one because the statement that the self can only say, without any doubt,

that they have the ability to think is true. However, Ricoeur adds that "this truth is a vain truth" ([1974]2007a:17) for it leads nowhere. By virtue of it being posited as the only valid truth, it cannot be followed by an attempt at a recovery of the self for all subsequent findings will be relegated to the level of speculation. It is here that reflection, for Ricoeur, must be introduced. The preceding long citation explains how, a subject who is understood as being in understanding can recover itself, step-by-step, through an interpretation of its others, its creations, and the whole past and present cultural world it inhabits. In Ricoeur's words, the self discovers itself in interpreting "the documents of its life" ([1974]2007a:18). This constructive motion can be graphically represented similarly to an atom where the subject represents the nucleus and where all acts of interpretation pass through a cultural document and come back to the subject to participate in its formation.

Figure 2: Interpretive Motion and Subject Formation
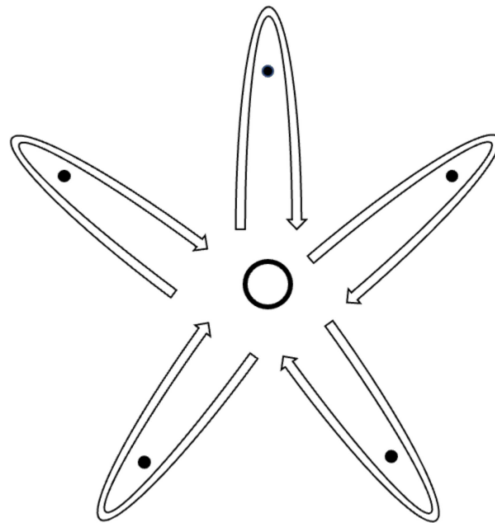
THE DIALECTIC OF EXPLANATION AND UNDERSTANDING

The subject presented in the previous section largely constitutes the first step of Ricoeur's hermeneutic philosophy: a subject which is never given, always interpreted. As mentioned before, his philosophy then develops into the dialectic of understanding and explanation through its encounter with structuralism. In *Structure and Hermeneutics* ([1974]2007b) an essay in which he analyzes the relation between structural anthropology and hermeneutics, Ricoeur argues for the necessity of a dialogue between philosophy and science. Although much of the essay discusses the notion of tradition and its relation to history and system, to present the dialectic of explanation and understanding, I simply want to focus on an important presupposition that is made at the beginning of the essay. Before assessing the relation of structural anthropology to hermeneutics, Ricoeur states that hermeneutics and structuralism cannot simply be directly opposed. On the one hand, structural thought makes use of a concrete object of analysis and puts it at a distance in order to objectify it. Ricoeur's hermeneutics, on the other hand, is embedded in the self, it is entirely reflexive. Thus, he states that structural anthropology belongs to the realm of science, and hermeneutics to the realm of philosophy. Human sciences cannot take on the stance of natural sciences where the subject is understood as an unquestioned observer and analyst. A form of reflexivity is necessary for the subject is part of the object of human sciences. This duality between subject and object leads to questioning the relation between science and philosophy and constitutes the second step in understanding the hermeneutic subject in social sciences.

In what is his most compelling critique of structuralism Ricoeur suggests that "the passage from a structural science to a structuralist philosophy" ([1974] 2007b:51) is incomplete and

incoherent. A structural science does not imply a self-consciousness and a structural philosophy would aim at excluding self-consciousness since it sets up a coercive order outside of subjectivity. Since according to Ricoeur an "order in itself is thought located outside itself" ([1974] 2007b:51), it cannot provide an understanding of the self and of itself. There is in this critique a fundamental assertion that thought cannot be dissociated from the self which implies the necessity of a philosophy that directly tackles the understanding of the self, prior to any scientific analysis. The function of hermeneutics in this respect is briefly covered in the following excerpt.

> In return, it is up to a reflective philosophy to understand itself as hermeneutics, so as to create the receptive structure for a structural anthropology. In this respect, it is the function of hermeneutics to make the understanding of the other— and his signs in various cultures—coincide with the understanding of the self and of being. ([1974] 2007B:51)

The social scientist cannot analyze the social and cultural world without simultaneously producing an understanding of themself. In critiquing structuralism, Ricoeur opens a dialogue between reflexive philosophy and science. This dialectic—like in much of Ricoeur's works—is defined as a false dialectic that takes the form of a dance or an interplay of limits and foundations between the two concepts rather than a stark exclusionary opposition. Ricoeur states that "[the] consciousness of the validity of a method is never separable from the consciousness of its limits" ([1974] 2007b:31) and we now understand that the concept of consciousness is rooted in a constant interpretation of the self. This necessity is brought up by the problem of historicity developed in classical hermeneutics. The following is the basic definition of hermeneutics that comes out of classical biblical hermeneutics.

> [T]he very work of interpretation reveals a profound intention, that of overcoming distance and cultural differences and of matching the reader to a text which has become foreign, thereby incorporating its meaning into the present comprehension a man is able to have of himself. (Ricoeur [1974] 2007a:4)

In any interpretation, there is always a historical or cultural distance to be closed between the interpreting subject and the interpreted object. The historical distance is extended to all social and intersubjective distances in social scientific inquiry. This finally leads us to what is commonly known as the Diltheyan divide or the separation between understanding and explanation. Human sciences cannot take the form of a pure science of explanation because culture, by virtue of being incessantly produced by a historical process, is always partly unknown. This critical distance is what makes a reflexive hermeneutic philosophy necessary in the analysis of culture.

Above all else, what the dialogue between philosophy and science suggests is a necessity for self-reflexivity, and a constant questioning of the place of the subject in an inquiry. Now, as mentioned above, Ricoeur's theory of subjectivity is grounded in what he calls "the graft of the *hermeneutic problem* onto the *phenomenological method*" ([1974] 2007a:3). The problem of historicity that emerges from the act of interpretation across time and culture amounts to the following questions: "in expressing itself, how can life objectify itself, and, in objectifying itself, how does it bring light to meanings capable of being taken up and understood by another historical being, who overcomes his own historical situation?" (Ricoeur [1974] 2007a:5) There is in the previous excerpt the assumption that life is meaningful, that it contains a meaning that can be extracted and studied. The general problem that emerges from meaning and understanding lays out the foundation of interpretive thought for Ricoeur. It is in the analysis of the objects that form

the cultural world that the social sciences find their playground. Again, for Ricoeur, science objectifies and analyzes from a critical distance. The self thus becomes a subject in opposition to these objects as its others. We find here the circular movement that defines the subject-object relation in hermeneutic thought. The subject is lost but can be recaptured through the otherness of language represented as objects or any form of cultural work.

As a final important element that must be added here, Ricoeur maintains that the integration of psychoanalysis to his thought reinforces the idea that the self is always initially lost.

> Psychoanalysis […] carries its challenge to the precise point where Descartes thought he had found the firm ground of certainty. Freud undermines the effects of meaning which constitute the field of consciousness and starkly reveals the play of phantasies and illusions in which our desire is masked. (Ricoeur [1974]2007e:237)

Contrarily to the Cartesian *cogito*, there is no initial truth that defines the ontology of understanding. For Ricoeur, "consciousness is first of all false consciousness" ([1974]2007a:18). It is here, following his reading of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, that Ricoeur will develop his *hermeneutics of suspicion* that will be discussed in the final chapter. For now, hermeneutics is not only self-understanding in interpretation, but also a constant movement, a never-ending recovery of the self. Since meaning is inexhaustible and always unequivocal from the start, and since there is always a new cultural object to interpret, there is also always a partially unknown subject who is engaged in the act of interpreting. Hermeneutics becomes an existential philosophy, because its goal is to constantly work towards revealing an existent, the one who interprets, and who thus interprets itself.

In sum, the entire development of the subject for Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics is well summarized in the following sentence: "[e]xistence becomes a self—human and adult—only by appropriating this meaning, which first resides "outside," in works, institutions, and cultural monuments in which life of the spirit is objectified." (Ricoeur [1974]2007a:22) We can understand this process as the double step produced by the motion of interpretation. To begin with, being is lost, but knows itself to be in the mode of knowing that is understanding. And then, in the face of its culture objectified in "works, institutions, and cultural monuments" and understood as its others, the self becomes the subject of social sciences. I would argue that the challenge presented by the recovery of the self largely permeates Ricoeur's writings from the 70s onwards. This project is further developed through Ricoeur's encounter with American analytical philosophers and eventually becomes an important exploration of ethics in *Oneself as Another* (1992). For the purposes of this thesis, I will remain at this point.

Ricoeur's hermeneutics form a strong anti-positivist base for social sciences. The theory presented above suggest that culture produces the one who interprets it in an even exchange and that this hermeneutic circle cannot be escaped. The challenge from this point onward will be to find a route within Ricoeur's great detour via signs to consider the role of nature in the production of culture, to allow an understanding of the natural world as otherness.. The following chapter will attempt to open a door to this problem from within Jane Bennett's works.

III.   The Pre-Modern Origins of Vital Materialism

> [By] pointing out that the Kantian imperative to treat humanity always as an end-in-itself and never merely as a means does not have a stellar record of success in preventing human suffering or promoting human well-being: it is important to raise the question of its actual, historical efficacy in order to open up space for forms of ethical practice that do not rely upon the image of an intrinsically *hierarchical* order of things. (Bennett 2010:12)

It is the desire to move past hierarchical thinking situating the human above all else, that motivates Jane Bennett to theorize an ontology of materiality built around her concept of *thing-power*. In the preface of her book *Vibrant Matter* (2010) Bennett uses Ricoeur's terminology in asserting that the ontology she imagines is more than a simple *hermeneutics of suspicion*. It is more than a self-doubt, more than a simple move away from direct consciousness in the face of materiality. For Bennett, non-humans are ontologically equivalent to humans, and, at the same time, non-humanity is completely foreign to humanity. What makes an analysis of an event possible through this vision is the fact that all agents involved– human or not – are "thoroughly material" (Bennett 2010:xiii). Materiality thus replaces subjectivity as the anchor of social sciences. This new prism through which all theorizing must pass, is erected upon a nearly totalizing critique of social constructivism that disrupts the hermeneutic subject-object relation presented in the previous chapter. In this third chapter, I will present Jane Bennett's concept of *thing-power* and will attempt to show that it emerges from Bennett's previous work on pre-modern ontologies and more precisely on the dialectic of Faith and Enlightenment. As mentioned before, I see

hermeneutics and new materialism as two different critiques of modernity and since it is impossible to directly pin them against one another, my strategy will be to bring back both theories to this moment of critique. For both Ricoeur and Bennett, this critique takes shape at a change of worldview with the death of religion as a total moral framework. I thus suggest that both author's treatment of this point of flexion offers the opportunity to read them side by side.

THING-POWER

Thing-power is a conceptualization of the role of non-human agency in social life, the idea that the social world is fully socially constructed is in fact rejected and labelled as an almost narcissistic anthropocentric theory. For Bennett, the first step in escaping this anthropocentrism is theorizing through anthropomorphism, or, in other words, by pointing out the human qualities of non-human materiality.

In building a philosophical grounding for her theory, Bennett draws connections to Spinoza's *conatus*, a form of power present in every type of material bodies, to Henry David Thoreau's concept of the Wild, a strange and un-human force that acts on human agency, and to Hent de Vries's *absolute* in political theology. This last concept is defined as what is beyond the grasp of subjectivity, something "that is detached or radically free from representation, and thus no-thing at all" (Bennett 2012:3). Language is not fit to describe the role of the *absolute* – and, for Bennett, of materiality – since it is something that is completely outside of human power. Consequently, Bennett defines de Vries' *absolute* as an epistemological limit, something that human knowledge

cannot recover. Here, Bennett remarks that this *absolute* affords "priority to humans as knowing bodies" (Bennett 2012:3), and, in opposition, she conceptualizes *thing-power* as having an agency equal do that of the human, bringing it at the same level as the human subject in inquiry. However, for this fully flattened ontology to even be possible, materiality and subjectivity must be seen as potentially independent from one another. In the following excerpt, Bennett acknowledges the ambitiousness of her project: "I will try, impossibly, to name the moment of independence (from subjectivity) possessed by things, a moment that must be there, since things do in fact affect other bodies, enhancing or weakening their power." (2012:3) By being focused on this moment of independence, the question of materiality becomes one of ontology rather than epistemology such as De Vries' *absolute* – and, as seen earlier, Ricoeur's recovering of the self.

To begin thinking about materiality's independence from subjectivity, Bennett works through a series of examples in the first chapter of her book. I will quickly go over two of these examples to illustrate her theory. First, the author recalls a moment when she was walking outside and she came across a few objects – a plastic glove, a dead rat, and others. She attempts to define the affect that these objects produced and asks the following questions:

> Was the thing-power of the debris I encountered but a function of the subjective and intersubjective connotations, memories, and affects that had accumulated around my ideas of these items? Was the real agent of my temporary immobilization on the street that day humanity, that is, the cultural meanings of "rat," "plastic," and "wood" in conjunction with my own idiosyncratic biography? (Bennett 2010:10)

A positive answer to these questions exemplifies well the attitude that constructionist theories would have toward the agency that produced the affect Bennett describes. However, she wants to

show that these objects are more than a mirror of specific social and cultural practices. She wants to show that there is a distance that cannot be bridged between these objects and the humans interacting around them. Bennett introduces Adorno's concept of 'nonidentity' according to which there is always a distance in our understanding of the representations of things we create and of the things themselves. The latter are analogous to De Vries' *absolute* in that it is impossible to fully grasp them. Bennett argues that Adorno conceptualizes something that resembles her own *thing-power*, but he stops on his way to "remind the reader that objects are always "entwined" with human subjectivity". (Bennett 2010:16). Bennett thus argues that Adorno does not go far enough, but she uses his theorizing to argue that there will always be a distance between herself and the objects she came across. Then, she wants to go even further and imagine these objects as being completely independent.

In her second example, Bennett presents the mysterious character of Odradek in Kafka 's short story *The Cares of a Family Man*. Odradek, a small spool of thread that moves around and utters comprehensible but uncanny-sounding words, is a perfect example of the blurred line between life and non-life: "[w]ooden yet lively, verbal yet vegetal, alive yet inert, Odradek is ontologically multiple." (Bennett 2010:8) The character's identity is never fixed, it is in a continuous state of becoming as Odradek straddles the line between human and non-human. Kafka creates a fictitious example that illustrates Bennett's theory, and through its description she suggests that there is a bit of Odradek in everything, that all of us, and all that surrounds us, is, to some extent, ontologically ambiguous. Within this ambiguity, an anthropomorphic vitality present in everything appears as the sole link between various types of materiality and thus becomes the base of a sort of ontology of everything.

No more than this short presentation of Bennett's central concept is needed to show its incompatibility with Ricoeur's intersubjective philosophy. A foreign non-human agency introduced within the process of interpretation breaks the process of understanding that gives life to subjectivity. As mentioned before, it is needed to bring both theories elsewhere to find a hinge for an analysis. With that goal in mind, I will argue in what follows that Bennett's theoretical project as it is presented in *Vibrant Matter* is built up in her early work. There is in Bennett's corpus a visible focus on various origin stories. Ontologies that ground any specific worldview stem from an understanding of the origin of humanity within the world. As it was alluded to in the first chapter, this analytical approach often favoured by post-humanist authors results in a revival of theology as a central pillar for social theory. It is in the origins of Bennett's own theory that her critique of modernity is maybe the most clearly detailed.

ORIGIN TALES AND ALTER-TALES

Bennett shares a concern for origin tales with Donna Haraway. In one of her earlier essays, she saw in Haraway's *Primate Visions* an invitation to theorize a "feminism that is itself an environmentalism, and vice versa." (Bennett 1993: 250) Already, Bennett envisioned something that could surpass feminist theory and recenter our attention onto "earthly life" (251). Most significantly, this call for a new form of feminism springs out of a critique of stories of origin. Haraway identifies five ontological claims hidden in origin stories that follow the model of the Biblical Genesis: the assumption of original happiness and absence of conflict, the assumption of

the pitiful creature who longs for the forgotten happiness, the prediscursive stability and immutability of nature, the moral code implied in the structure of the prediscursive source, and finally, above all, the omniscient Father who oversees all the previous elements that define the nature of human life (Bennett 1993:251-252). These assumptions taken together create a rigid structure that result in an ontological framework that promotes hierarchy and universality. For Bennett and Haraway, "to idealize perfection and unity is to suppress anomaly and multiplicity; to define beauty as harmony is to elevate fear of difference into an aesthetic imperative; to dream of an original order is to depoliticize the current one; to be homesick for the Father's land is to be tempted to assign the status of Truth to the ways of one's own." (Bennett 1993: 257) Accordingly, cultural imperatives can be traced back through a sort of archeology to the model of the Biblical Genesis.

Through Haraway's work, Bennett argues for an analytical model that poetically and creatively contests origin tales through novel "alter-tales" (1993). Alter-tales are not created to replace origin tales but rather to confront them and render visible their limitations. Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (2005) itself appears as an alter-tale for a techno-human creatures that knows no Western origin tale. As such Bennett looks at Haraway's alter-tale as a reworking of our relationship with nature that eludes the five ontological assumptions presented above. As the ground for such analyses and manifestos, concepts that permeate stories of origin – such as nostalgia – are re-directed to serve new socio-political projects.

> Nostalgia for foundations is a longing for something solid, fixed, final and true, morally certain, and fatherly. As such, it leads to patriarchal laws, imperialistic claims, religious or scientific dogmatisms, or normalizing constructions presented as

> inevitabilities. But nostalgia for foundations can also become a kind of will to wildness, an ache for that which is extra-ordinary different, perhaps improved. As a contrast model, it is one of the ways Euro-Americans create conceptual space for ways of life not yet in social and political place. It is a source of ethical energy and political imagination in that the experiences nostalgia makes possible can overshadow the very motives that inspire them. (Bennett 1993:261:262)

As seen in this excerpt, origin tales and alter-tales become intertwined in a dialectical relation. Both oppose each other but also merge to produce new ways of thinking. This dialectical form of analysis can also be used with other stories, it is not limited to the Biblical Genesis. Various worldviews and ways of thinking can all be traced back to their origins and their histories can be creatively re-imagined.

Although it is not explicitly how she presents it, I argue that, in *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett presents the social theory that results from her own alter-tale, that of the re-enchantment of the world. For this thesis, it is this re-enchanted world itself that should be understood from the point of view of hermeneutics. I will thus need to carefully read through and analyze this alter-tale which opposes the tale of the disenchantment of the world (1986; 2001). Here, disenchantment coincides with the Enlightenment and its rhetoric of rationalization and categorization. In her 2001 monograph *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Bennett creatively presents rationalization as a historical process via the works of Max Weber, Hans Blumenberg and Simon Critchley. This historical process however has a starting point, an origin tale of its own, and the most thoroughly developed exegesis of this genesis is found in Bennett's very first book. Before being able to further analyze vital materialism – or enchanted materialism (2001) – as an alter-tale, I will, in the following section, present the rationalization of the world in opposition of which it grows.

THE TALE OF RATIONALIZATION: THE DIALECTIC OF FAITH AND ENLIGHTENMENT

In her first book adapted from her doctoral dissertation, Bennett analyzes the dialectic of Faith and Enlightenment in Hegel's work. This is what I refer as Bennett's origin tale of the rationalization of the world. No more than a cursory reading of this dissertation is needed to see that the ethical project behind Bennett's vital materialism started to germinate there. In her dissertation titled *Unthinking Faith and Enlightenment: Hegel and the Impasse of Modernity* (1986)[6] Bennett presents an ethics of awe that seems foundational for her later theorizing. Behind this ethical project lies a critique of some basic tenets of the Enlightenment – namely the subject-object relation that comes out of it –, and a renewal of pre-modern thought. Bennett's careful analysis of Hegel's understanding of the transition to modernity justifies a need to rethink and value anew the foundations of pre-modern ontologies. I will carefully present this analysis in the following paragraphs.

Historically, Hegel associates the Reformation with the Enlightenment and the beginning of modernity and sees this period of history as a completion of subjectivity. The reformation is for him a transitional period that cemented the worldview associated with modernity, and before which subjectivity was in a state of incompleteness. Pre-modern subjectivity could not clearly define itself from the world it inhabited and categorize its different parts (Bennett 1986: 24-25). In other words, "Enlightenment was the de-mystification of a world of robust faith, a world filled

---

[6] This chapter relies directly on Bennett's doctoral dissertation rather than on the published book.

with divine signs, intrinsic meaning, and intelligible order. Enlightenment transformed nature-as-God's text into nature as a set of rationalizable, mechanical, potential useful parts." (Bennett 1986:11) God was pushed back in Enlightenment's cosmology to give a place to reason and rationality. The divine represented the unknown, it could no longer hold a central position in a world dominated by the pursuit of verifiable scientific knowledge. For Hegel, this represents an almost radical "self-assertion" (Bennett 1986:11) a move through which humanity saw itself as taking control of its own place in the world by gaining maximal knowledge about itself and the world. This new reflexivity was too compelling to be refuted by pre-modern theological critiques of the Enlightenment, but Faith did not die completely as it survived in an adapted modern form that conceded ground to reason. (12-13). From that point onward, Bennett considers Faith and Enlightenment in a dialectical relation that is foundational to the modern age; she argues that they both can only be fully understood in opposition to one another. The point here is that modernity can, in essence, be understood as a continuation of the Faith-Enlightenment dialectic. Modern Faith and Enlightenment remain in continual critique of one another. It is this primary ontological debate that underpins the modern age for Bennett. In her analysis of the Faith-Enlightenment dialectic, she presents an ideal type of pre-modern faith she calls Robust Faith in order to have an ontological reference point to pin against modern ontologies. If we accept the value ascribed to Robust Faith as an antithesis to modern thought, we can certainly read it today as an important aspect of the foundations of post-humanism.

Robust Faith proposes an enchanted view of the world where things are connected through inherent similarities. However, through this view of the world, resemblance alone does not inform us about the nature of things, things all bare an essential resemblance for they are all God's word on Earth. Under Robust Faith, knowledge is interpretation of God's will gained through analysis of the connections between all things, material or not. These connections are made apparent by nature itself since it "speaks and says that it coheres through relations of resemblance" (Bennett 1986:15). Humans hear whispers of God's word on earth through nature's voice but can never fully and truly understand it. Knowledge of the world is thus always understood as incomplete knowledge of God.

> Just as a poet conveys a message through the medium of words (a medium that precludes the possibility of a transparent transmission) and just as it is the reader's job to participate in reconstructing that message, the author of the world speaks through signs inscribed in the world and it is the human role to interpret those signs. (Bennett 1986:18)

Two distinct elements participate in obfuscating divine messages on Earth: the limit of human capacity for understanding the intentions of a superior form of being, and the concrete limits of materiality. This fragmentary nature of knowledge under Robust Faith is essential to define human beings for they too are in relation to the world, they too are incomplete signs of divine will. It is thus pointless to seek absolute truth, for truth is only visible from God's perspective and is incessantly dependent on God's will. In essence, if humanity would fully understand itself and the world, it would cease to be defined as human and become God (15-16). Bennett argues that the

role of humanity on Earth under Robust Faith is to interpret God's intentions by analysing its relations to the world comprised of "the objects of human knowledge" (16). There is no possibility of full mastery of the world, but humanity nonetheless ceaselessly tries to interpret the meanings hidden in all phenomena because everything is charged with an immanent truth stemming from the divine creation.

> Ancient texts, contemporary writings, theological treatises, ravings of the mad, art, music, and miracle plays were all subject to constant and relentless commentary, for overlapping interpretations were required to reveal the oracle within texts. (Bennett 1986:17)

The truth solely belongs to God, but humanity is motivated by the hope of deciphering parts of it. This hope seems almost definitional of the human condition under Robust Faith. The potential to access some part of the absolute is necessary for if the natural world were to be completely opaque, humanity would lose its special status of interpreter. And it is also, as we will see later in this chapter, this appetite for truth seeking that opens the door to a dialogue with and a transition towards Enlightenment. By piling up complementary or contradictory readings of the world and its origins humanity separates itself from other forms of being. On a practical level, the interpretation of divine messages takes place through a combination of seemingly opposite forms of interpretation in divination and textual exegesis. Since language here has no special status – it simply is an intermediary through which pass various attempts at interpreting Divine meanings – textual exegesis and the revival of Greek philosophy are not seen as superior forms of knowledge acquisition. There is no epistemological hierarchy in an enchanted world.

In sum, Robust Faith can be summarized in three constitutive elements: a holist view of the world united by God's will, the incompleteness of all knowledge gained via the principle of resemblance, and lastly the interpretive character of such partial knowledge (Bennett 1986:19-20). For our purposes, it is mostly important to note that the pre-modern subject under Robust Faith sees itself as an integral part of the world and does not question its resemblance and connections to the world, even if these principles are deeply entrenched in its worldview. This attitude strongly clashes with modernity's quest for scientific classification and categorization.

FROM FAITH TO ENLIGHTENMENT

Hegel argues that pre-modern Faith started to fail itself because it could not account for the natural alienation that rose within human consciousness. For him, alienation is an integral part of the evolution of subjectivity; it constitutes a first step, differentiation, in the understanding of humanity's existence in the world. If subjectivity is to be understood on a path towards absolute knowledge (from a Hegelian perspective), Robust Faith cannot be seen as more than a step through which humanity became confronted to and eventually accepted its own uniqueness. Robust Faith is no more than a necessary but dark footnote in history (Bennett 1986:25-30).

Bennett challenges this Hegelian perspective. Here we arrive at our desired destination, it is here that Bennett introduces a different perspective which I argue still informs her entire body of work.

> Once we become aware of the historicity of knowledge and begin to doubt the existence of absolute knowledge, once we no longer believe that the mystery expressed through religion can be raised to the level where its speculative content is fully uncovered, Hegel's discussions of Faith can be seen in a new light. Faith is no longer merely an insightful though naive precursor to absolute knowledge; it becomes a repository of historical evidence through which to question the possibility of transparent knowledge. (Bennett 1986:30)

Bennett's essentially hinges her work on a critique of Hegel's negative view of Faith. She argues that all the good that Hegel saw in Faith was in the role of the Church and not in Faith's relation to the natural world. Motivated by a constant evolution toward absolute knowledge, Hegel dismisses Faith's attitude as intellectually childish. The self is misguided as if it had yet to come of age, or as Bennett puts it, "the self is either an overzealous producer of silliness or an unthinking slave of dogma." (31) Bennett observes that this Hegelian reading of Faith is built through the paradigm of Enlightenment. It is possibly this biased focus on "higher" forms of rationality that impeded Hegel from seeing value in Faith's enchanted view of the world even if a rich description of it is present in his works (Bennett 1986:31-32).

The world, for Bennett, is not inherently readily available to human understanding, and so, "transparent knowing is a chimeral pursuit" (31). There is prior to our analyses an indescribable reality that we have historically failed to account for. This failure stems from the transition from Faith to Enlightenment or rather from the lack of nuances within the complete rejection of Faith's enchanted world in favour of Enlightenment's scientific rationality. Robust Faith as an ideal type represents "a sign of the irreducible element of opacity in the world." (Bennett 1986:31) The foundational principles of Robust Faith thus serve as a fertile ground for post-humanist theorizing

that seeks to reverse our incapacity to situate ourselves according to unalterable natural forces. Metaphorically, this suggests that humanity exists under a roaring volcano but fails to ontologically account for this reality. To reanimate this view of the world, Bennett goes back to the moment when rationalization took hold.

Unsatisfied by Hegel's reading of the transition from Faith to Enlightenment, Bennett relies on an alternative theory developed by Hans Blumenberg (2001:65-75;1986: 33-57). Instead of focusing on the institution of the Church, Blumenberg develops an understanding of Faith's disintegration from the point of view of Faith itself. However, for both point of views, the moment of disenchantment associated with the enlightenment is always also one of secularization (Bennett 2001:65).

> It was no longer reasonable to suppose that the signs of divine will are legibly inscribed in nature. If God can create in ways not penetrable by human reason, then the world available to reason may be one of contingency, perhaps even sheer arbitrariness. The world as text thus disintegrates and the world slowly takes the plastic form of the mathematizable. (Bennett 1986:34)

For Blumenberg the unreliability of this theological nominalism creates a psychological state that encourages the rationalization of the world (Bennett 2001:67). If God is everywhere and has absolute freedom, the view of a teleological world in which His absolute intentions are inscribed cannot hold. A fixed meaning appears as a restriction of God's freedom to modulate His own creation. Under this view that is slowly taking form towards the end of the Middle Ages, stories of the origin of the world are seen as being coercive to Divine intentions. The neat holist understanding of the world-as-text described above thus slowly disintegrates. According to

Blumenberg it is in this way, from within Faith's view of the world – that evolved into an extreme nominalism – that the door to the rationalization of Enlightenment was opened (Bennett 2001:66-69). Bennett summarizes this argument for the rise of the psychological state leading to the disenchantment of the world as follows: "[n]ominalist ideas, from the medieval to the early modern period in Europe, provoked a teleological meltdown and, eventually, against their intentions, gave rise to a self-assertive reason in the service of mastering a materialized world." (2001:70).

It is after this origin of the disenchantment of the world, that Faith and Enlightenment evolve dialectically. The disenchanted facing the old enchanted. The rational in opposition to the irrational. The scientific criticizing the mystic. According to Enlightenment, Faith is naïve, it refuses to ask simple, logical questions about the world and break them in concrete elements to be analyzed, because as we have seen Faith's view of the world is a completely unified one. And thus, Enlightenment gains the upper hand for it "problematizes and dissociates the simple unities of Faith and Faith cannot reply, for its affirmations, by definition, are not susceptible to the sort of justification Enlightenment demands. Enlightenment condemns Faith's stance as irrational." (Bennett 1986:48-49).

Enlightenment leads to a negation of extra-human agency through a focus that is entirely on human senses. Faith's holist view of the world adds a veil of uncertainty between human senses and the enchantment of materiality; Enlightenment removes this veil and the epistemological limit it represents. After this reality, is now discovered in the relation between the senses of the human subject and the materiality of the world broken down in specific objects (Bennett 1986:63). This mode of analysis which Bennett calls "sense-certainty" (63) develops itself through a complete

isolation of concrete, sensuous matter. Holism is disrupted, humanity is no longer an integral part of the world since "sense-certainty as a theory of knowledge presupposes a sharp split between that which is the cause of sense data (objects) and that which receives and interprets the data (subjects)." (63) Humanity becomes the central observer of its reality. All human understanding of the world, or rather reality as it is understood by humans (the true reality for humanity), is now inscribed in meanings attached to objects and deciphered by the human mind. Objects have no inherent value in themselves since reality is entirely defined by subjective human reasoning. Objects become "second-order beings" (71). In short, Enlightenment wants to break down the world in analyzable parts and then analyze them through the prism of human senses. All traces of uncertainty present in matter are stripped away to preserve humanity's ontological position as the discoverer of knowledge. Logic and rationality become the epistemological tools that will exhaust nature of all its mystery. This also further solidifies subject/object dichotomous and hierarchical thinking. In fact, humanity has total free will under Enlightenment's philosophy; no other thing occupies the center of existence. Subjectivity rests at the top while objects only serve as repository of knowledge or as mirrors for textually codified subjectivity.

> The primacy of the human self and its subjectivity go hand in hand with the loss of the object as an independent center of resistance. The human subject has become the model to which anything that claims "in-itself-hood" has to conform. Clearly, natural objects do not conform to this model."(71)

This new dichotomy introduces Enlightenment's internal paradox: humanity itself is both subject and object by virtue of being made of sensuous matter (Bennett 1986:73-78). Enlightenment wants to value the world for its potential utility to human subjectivity, but since the human mind cannot escape its physical vessel – the body – particular humans are under the threat

of being seen as means to an end of a punctual general will. In principle, subjectivity has complete freedom but since this freedom depends on an arbitrary general will it is perpetually threatened by Enlightenment's faulty internal logic. An uncertain contrast to pure rationality is needed to safeguard humanity from turning itself into simple utility[7].

Now, this opposition between Faith and Enlightenment understood as a historical process is often left out in favour for a view fully on the side of Enlightenment. Bennett argues that this simple fact needs to be highlighted to develop an alternative to disenchanted rationality. Faith is not dead, its worldview is integrated and subverted by Enlightenment, it survives "incognito inside Enlightenment." (Bennett 1986:58) The three constitutive elements of Robust Faith seen earlier – holism, incomplete knowledge, and humanity as interpreter – are integrated inside Enlightenment. In essence, Faith's harmonious world in which humanity interprets God's word in search for knowledge that is forever incomplete is reversed in Enlightenment's world where humanity is interpreter but also recipient of finite knowledge. Here we see that Enlightenment has not, and will never, fully vanquish in its battle against Faith for its worldview is hinged on the foundational principles of Robust Faith. Faith has surely lost its robustness, but it has adapted.

---

[7] *Figure 1* in the first chapter is a visual representation of this modern attitude. The critique of modernity presented here is also one made by anti-positivist philosophers, especially those writing in the aftermath of the world wars.

Bennett does not wish to produce a Hegelian synthesis out of the dialectic of Faith and Enlightenment. If Hegel thought that Faith would disappear when Enlightenment would have solidified itself into ultimate knowledge, Bennett imagines something that transcends both orientations to the world. She presents a theory based on competing conceptions of nature: *holism* or nature and humanity as part of a complete whole, and *prometheanism* or nature as a means to an end. Discourse on knowledge, subjectivity, or political structures unfold following these particular orientations to nature: "to conceive nature as raw material to be used and mastered is to be able to advocate environmental management, juridical democracy and the rational state; to conceive nature as ordered in fundamental harmony with human needs is to be able to advocate ecological holism and the attuned state." (Bennett 1986:250) There is no resolution between holism and prometheanism, both attitudes seem stuck in perpetual stubborn disagreement, neither is capable of surpassing its deeply rooted flaws. And most importantly, Bennett finds that "neither aspires to let otherness be, to tolerate it even after it has come out of the closet, to allow it to find expression in its own way." (253) Enchanted holism and utilitarian prometheanism both march toward unity. A productive relation to heterogeneity is missing in both approaches. And thus, all previous exegeses lead to this culminating point: the unsatisfying ethical stance of both halves of the Faith-Enlightenment dialectic pushes Bennett to theorize a *fractious holism* to transcend the rigid dialectic and answer the following question: "can there be an orientation to the self, others, and nature that is not destructive of the non-rational, non-rationalizable and non-intelligible elements therein and that does not, implicitly or explicitly, assume the world to be user-friendly?" (1986:258) It is for me this *fractious holism* and its accompanying *ethics of awe* that most evidently

represent the roots of Bennett's vital materialism exemplified by the previously discussed concept of thing-power. In *Unthinking Faith and Enlightenment,* we start seeing the very beginning of this theory.

In her own theorizing, Bennett keeps a greater influence from Faith by sticking to a certain form of holism. She clings on the "harmonious integration" (270) that is so central to Faith's view of the world. Indeed, as seen above, Bennett views humans and non-humans as forming a coherent whole – or what she will eventually call, following Deleuze and Guattari, an assemblage. This harmony aims at avoiding the bare chaos brought by the homogenizing science of Enlightenment that is today perhaps best exemplified by the agricultural practice of monocropping. However, something more is needed to permit otherness to bloom within a holist view of the world. For this, holism must be weak, it must avoid teleology, it must include a possibility to fail and accept this positively, hence a "fractious" holism. This, for Bennett, means, "to be disposed to make breaches, to interrupt good feeling or harmony," and consequently "[a]n ethic of otherness would have to abide by this ontology, in a sense be expressive of it." (271) But how can an acceptance of anormal ruptures become ontologically normalized? Bennett puts forth the idea that "fascination, wonder, awe" (271-272) as actions can ground this ethical project. What produces awe as a reaction commands respect, awe-inspiring objects simply cannot be boiled down to their utility. However, awe itself is unsatisfying. Awe is understood as being culturally produced in the sense that awe-inspiring objects have been marked by extra-ordinary cultural circumstances that make them surpass basic human understanding. A prestigious object such as a photo-realistic portrait inspires wonder and commands respect because at first glance humans struggle to understand the conditions of its production. The point here is that awe in nature or in human-made objects is

produced by what is at least partly alien to the experience of the human subject. It is an acceptance and revaluing of this alienness that leads to a productive relation to otherness. In other words, Bennett theorizes an ethic of awe mostly as an anti-thesis to the utilitarian ethics of the enlightenment. Instead of valuing nature as material means to an end, Bennett suggests valuing it "as an index of the limitations of human understanding" (273). However, she also acknowledges the inherent weakness of this project because "the link between the experience of strangeness and respect, admiration or reverence is quite tenuous" (273). There is no clear way to separate awe and disgust within this theory. Furthermore, this theory underplays the Foucauldian argument that otherness is produced through categorization by a coercive social order. Bennett, then, is attempting to theorize an escape from humanity's paradoxical relation to otherness: trying to develop acceptance for a rejected ontological category despite the fact that this rejection has been previously culturally produced (274-275).

Consequently, the ethics of awe under fractious holism will represent a dance between the positions of Robust Faith and that of Enlightenment. Humanity must confront otherness by accepting its role in its production. Otherness must be seen and accepted with a certain level of categorization. However, a certain level of holism is needed as a counterweight to avoid total utilitarian categorization.

> It is difficult for the ethic I seek to speak in general terms about the contours of the "raw material" of the self and world. Its holism demands that it say something in order to distinguish it from radical subjectivism or the empiricism of discrete facts; its understanding of the inevitability of otherness demands that it not say so much that it lapses back into harmonious holism. (Bennett 1986:279)

Although simply presented as a constant negotiation, as a dance involving two opposing viewpoints, the theory of fractious holism may seem unsatisfactory, I will stop here in its presentation and simply open to the next chapter by presenting this question asked by Bennett: "What is the best way to have order with otherness?". And to this, she simply answers, "we must acknowledge the gap between self and world, take responsibility for it, and seek to tread lightly upon nature where and when possible." (1986:281) It is essentially this answer that motivates the analysis in final chapter where I will attempt to understand this gap between self and world from a hermeneutical point of view. To close out this chapter it is important to clarify that I am not here arguing that Bennett's vital materialism is definitely rooted in the dialectic of Faith and Enlightenment. Rather I simply want to point out that the ethical agenda of Bennett's most recent theory is undoubtably analogous to the critique of the enlightenment's utilitarian ethics presented here.

IV. Interpretation, Materiality, and Subjectivity

In this final chapter, I will attempt to present a hermeneutic subject that is confronted with the uncertainty within matter theorized by Jane Bennett. Thus far, I have argued for the necessity of ascribing a certain form of agency to matter in the first chapter, then I have presented the inescapability of the hermeneutic circle and its reliance on a human subject in the second chapter, and I have presented the roots of Bennett's theory of materiality in the third chapter. In what follows, I will sort out the previously covered elements to answer the question I have opened this thesis with: can a hermeneutic theory adapt itself to an ontology that ceases to prioritise the human subject in order to afford an agency to materiality? For its reliance on the human subject, it is interpretation itself that is here challenged by materiality. To answer this problem, I will reverse the initial question and ask instead: what type of interpretive subjectivity would survive the challenge of materiality? It will be impossible as maintained in the introduction to theorize a hermeneutic subject within a monist ontology since otherness remains the existential anchor of the subject. However, as we have seen in the second chapter, subjectivity is always constituted by otherness, and the hermeneutic subject constantly defines itself through its encounters with its human others. A new encounter signifies a new questioning and a new understanding of the self. The only way to conceptualize a subject confronted with non-human otherness is then a subject that is further weakened. I will consequently seek out the hermeneutic subject in its most weakened form.

The weakened subject that I am looking for is in large part theorized in Ricoeur's 1974 essay *Religion, Atheism, and Faith*. In this very personal essay, Ricoeur juggles his Christianity with the atheist discourse in the modern world he inhabits. If God and religion are truly dead, can faith be salvaged in some way? Can one remain faithful after the death of God? This problem represents a "radical challenge" (440) for Ricoeur. *Religion, Atheism, and Faith* stands as a test to his Christianity. The very title of the essay represents this challenge: religion is destabilized by the critiques of atheism and Ricoeur asks what form of faith survives this confrontation. The title of this chapter – and of this thesis – is meant to mirror that of *Religion, Atheism, and Faith*: *Interpretation, Materiality, and Subjectivity*. What sort of subjectivity remains once interpretation has been challenged by materiality? Just as Ricoeur willingly accept the thesis of atheism as a disruption of his own positions, I argue that interpretation must adapt to materiality.

In the previous chapter, I have brought Bennett's work back to the origin of the utilitarian ethics she criticized. In large part, this moment represents the rise of modernity accompanied by an important shake-up of the religious foundations of society. To make the theoretical connection I seek in this thesis, I will look at Ricoeur's treatment of this moment. More than simply bringing to the conversation a subject weakened by loss, Ricoeur's essay connects the discussion led throughout this thesis to its common theme of faith and loss of faith. It is thus on these two fronts – a weakened subject, and the hermeneutic analysis of atheism – that *Religion, Atheism, and Faith* can be read as a synthetic piece for this thesis. Amongst all prominent hermeneutic thinkers, I believe Ricoeur is the one who is the most concerned with the fallibility of the human subject. His earliest hermeneutic work in *Fallible Man* (1996) and *The Symbolism of Evil* (1960) is in fact very much concerned with the cracks and fissures that permeate existence and interpretation, and which

lead to a fragmented human subject. Ricoeur truly integrated humility as a foundational principle to his reflexive philosophy. I believe that humility as a core principle is what leads him to willingly theorize from a weakened position.

ATHEISM

In Nietzsche and Freud, Ricoeur reads an atheism that attacks God as the God of prohibition who sets the contours of a universal morality. It is thus the moral framework provided by religion that is destroyed. For Ricoeur, this form of atheism is most convincing and needs to be looked at closely by philosophers – even those who remain faithful like himself. This is mostly due to the wide applicability of the critical method developed by Nietzsche and Freud for they attack religion at the level of culture. This analysis of religion is rooted in Ricoeur's *hermeneutics of suspicion*. For Ricoeur, the masters of suspicion "have created a new kind of criticism, a critique of cultural representations considered as symptoms of desire and fear." (442). For them, illusion (the deception of religion or its hidden meaning) is a "cultural function" (442). Religion is entirely based in the cultural dimension of human existence. It is thus susceptible to be analyzed hermeneutically since "the public meanings of our consciousness conceal true meanings, which can be brought to light only by adopting the attitude of suspicion and cautious critical scrutiny." (Ricoeur 442)

Alison Scott-Baumann (2009) notes that Ricoeur sees in the works of the three masters of suspicion a critique that undoes the human by disrupting its sense of certainty: "Marx, Nietzsche

and Freud placed doubt in our minds, but unlike Descartes they did not remove it, they deliberately left it there." (45) For the analysis of religion, this doubt is fundamental, since religion itself, as an institution, is designed to hide its meaning. In Ricoeur's words, "religion has a meaning that remains unknown to the believer by virtue of a specific act of dissimulation which conceals its true origin from the investigation of consciousness." (442). It thus becomes atheism's own cultural task to unravel this meaning. In fact, atheism begins as a simple hermeneutics that reveals the hidden layers of meaning within religion. The form of hermeneutics here is the one developed in *The Symbolism of Evil* (1969) where the task of the interpreting subject is to unmask hidden symbolic meanings behind all meaning presented at the forefront. Modernity for Ricoeur represents the first moment in history where myth and history become dissociated in the consciousness of humanity. We, humans, then become "tempted to give ourselves up to a radical demythization of all our thinking." (Ricoeur 1969:162). Within this historical process that is the demythization of religion, and once the original source of its meaning is exposed to be empty, this hermeneutics takes the form of atheism.

> Nietzsche and Freud have developed in a parallel manner a type of reductive hermeneutics which is at the same time a kind of philology and a kind of genealogy. It is a philology, an exegesis, an interpretation insofar as the text of our consciousness can be compared to a palimpsest, under the surface of which another text has been written. The task of this special exegesis is to decipher this text. But this hermeneutics is at the same time a genealogy, since the distortion of the text emerges from a conflict of forces, of drives [*pulsions*] and counterdrives, whose origin must be brought to light. It is evident that this is not a genealogy in the ordinary chronological sense of the word. For even when it refers to historical stages, this genesis does not lead back to a temporal origin but rather to a possible source, or better, an empty place from which ethical and religious values emerge. The genealogical task is to reveal the emptiness of this source. (442-43)

Ricoeur here calls the hermeneutics behind atheism a genealogy because, as explained above, it exposes one by one the layers of meaning hidden in religion. What becomes apparent – and what makes Nietzsche and Freud's atheism unique – is that religion is a cultural function that hides basic human impulses such as fear and desire. No matter their differences, both authors mount a similar – and, according to Ricoeur, complementary – attack on the cultural function of religion. This is what philosophy and human sciences cannot avoid.

First, Nietzsche conceptualizes God as a realm, a purely ideal realm from which morality and its associated prohibitions and punishments come down unto humanity. Nietzsche's atheism establishes the emptiness and total relativity of this realm's meaningfulness. It can thus be said that "[t]he God of prohibition is this ideal realm which does not exist, and which is yet the source of all prohibitions" (443). What is revealed here, is the baselessness of the ideal realm. A deep disenchantment follows the demystification of the original source as nihilism reveals its emptiness. The human subject is confronted with the relativity of its worldview and is set free from its ethical prescriptions; traditional values lose their sway. Ricoeur understands the *umwertung*, Nietzsche's reversal of traditional values, as a "reversal of a prior reversal" (443-444), which gives back to the subject the agency of establishing its own values (the will to power). All forms of religion, Christianity included, cannot survive this critique, a foundational moment for modernity. This also represents for Ricoeur – and also before him for Heidegger (1962) – the end of metaphysics as it relies on the transcendental qualities of an absolute realm. Although Ricoeur does not push his own analysis this far, we can surely see in this loosening of a moral framework connections with the previously covered utilitarian ethics of Enlightenment in a disenchanted world. This moment is doubly important for us since nihilism as a symptom of modernity, a "historical process"

(Ricoeur 443), destroys any transcendental morality, but also prefigures a critique to the utilitarian ethics that follows this destruction by initiating a post-metaphysical mode of critique that is developed by authors like Ricoeur.

Second, Ricoeur sees in Freud's superego a similar conception of an ideal realm from which stem morality and prohibition. Psychoanalysis is seen as a hermeneutics that reveals the meanings and drives behind human ethical consciousness insofar as it is understood as a text. The superego sets moral and ethical boundaries, but "although [it] takes up a position above the ego and functions as a tribunal, an agency [instance] that observes, judges, and condemns, it is stripped of its absolute appearance; it rather appears to be a structure that is derivative and acquired." (444) The origin of this cultural edifice in Freud's work is found in the myth of the killing of the Father according to which human volition is based on the guilt attached to an initial act of accusation. This guilt is represented through the image of God and carried out in religious (and cultural) practices. There is a constant negotiation of drives and instincts against prohibitions, and religious practices serve as regulators of this confrontation.

> A holiday is permitted, or rather a prescribed excess, a solemn violation of prohibition. People do not commit the excesses which at all times have characterized holidays, as a result of an order to be in a holiday mood, but because in the very nature of a holiday there is excess; the holiday mood is brought about by the release of what is otherwise forbidden. (Freud 1960:121)

Here, Freud explains that a holiday serves – by negation, by being an exception – as a reminder of prohibition. The guilt attached to the initial act of killing only serves as an ethical barometer as long as it remains alive in the collective consciousness. The eucharist is for Christianity an example

of a practice that maintains this "subsequent obedience" (Freud 1960:123). Once the structure behind everyday prohibition is exposed, through the reductive hermeneutics Ricoeur reads in psychoanalysis, once values and human will are shown their true origin in the muting of drives and instincts, the God who gives out punishment loses its agency. Whether this myth is deemed valid or totally absurd, the result of the hermeneutic process behind it remains the same: the exposed cultural structure is found to have no true transcendental qualities, the agency that judges and punishes the human subject is nothing more than a reflection of the subject's own cultural environment. Just as in Nietzsche's work, submission to this agency is now understood as weakness. Both Freud and Nietzsche point out "that the concepts of good and evil are created by means of projection within a situation of weakness and dependency." (444) Atheism exposes this weakness and opens up the limits of morality.

Now, what is the meaning of this atheism in which Ricoeur finds value? He approaches this question – the death of religion and of God – by highlighting three problems. First, the God that is dead needs to be defined. Second, the murderer must be identified. And third, we must question the meaning of the death. We have seen previously that universal morality and metaphysics are tossed aside by atheism, it is then the God of theology and metaphysics that has perished. It is an unavoidable cultural and historical process that committed the murder since, as seen before, "reductive hermeneutics discovers behind practical reason the functioning of instincts, the expression of fear and desire." (446) This reductive hermeneutics read through Nietzsche and Freud's atheism is a substitute to the more direct reflective philosophy of Kant. A historical structure behind the *a priori* is revealed. The edifice of religious morality is built upon an initial act of accusation which is perpetuated through the image of God. This God of condemnation is

dead. Such is the result of atheism; it places the human subject in an uncertain, empty place. Since the presented reductive hermeneutics simply restores the origin of values by showing their origin in an act of accusation without positively building upon the void created by the loss of values, it remains for Ricoeur an "accusation of accusation" (447). The redefinition of the human condition is left untouched.

This brief exegesis of the school of suspicion's atheism seems to introduce a subject that understands its weakness within a rigid moral framework, and to which now belongs the power to set new ethical limits. Within a sort of sociology of culture, religion is presented as a simple institution from which the subject finds emancipation. However, this subject that understands religious morality as coming from a position of weakness is itself weakened in relation to its predecessor. This affirmation may seem contradictory, but it is only through doubt and suspicion that religion is set aside and the subject who is doubtful and suspicious loses the power and fullness of certainty. No longer can the subject affirm with complete certainty that they know who they are. Perpetual doubt and the loss of an unquestionable order of things leaves the subject asking, "who am I?" and then, "who am I within this world?" This pre-ethical moment leaves space for a desire for power and control, but Ricoeur, theorizing in the post-war moment, wants to guard us against this desire. In order to do so, he attempts to maintain, or maybe revive the humility that came along faith.

In sum, atheism reveals religion as a cultural process. This revelation amounts to the destruction of a moral order grounded in the image of God as the purveyor of absolute morality. It is this process, shown in the works of Nietzsche and Freud, that strips away the human subject

from the frame provided by faith – or Faith as it presented in Bennett's works. The tale told by Ricoeur here is very different from that of disenchantment seen earlier, but the result for the human subject remains the same: the loss of a moral order that situates God (Nature) as an untouchable and unintelligible source of meaning leaves the human subject with an untethered desire for a total mastery of the world. This is where the connection between Bennett's vital materialism and Ricoeur's hermeneutic philosophy becomes the most apparent. Both authors then attempt to positively reinstate a certain frailty to our understanding of our condition. Bennett theorizes a fractious holism that eventually takes the form of vital materialism, and Ricoeur develops a weak and humble hermeneutic subject. I will now present this weak subject as the culmination of this thesis.

A WEAKENED HERMENEUTIC SUBJECT

The human subject stripped of its moral framework finds certainty in the positive sciences of explanation. To take up the place left open by God, humanity attempts to master the world it now strives to dominate. There is no place for the unknown. The result of this worldview is the anthropocentrism that is heavily critiqued by new materialists. In her doctoral dissertation, Bennett explores this scientific agenda through a critique of environmental management. Contemporary hermeneutics similarly position themselves against the positivist worldview that promotes explanation as the agenda of social sciences. We have seen in the second chapter that for Ricoeur a dialogue between science and philosophy is needed in the human and social sciences for understanding and interpretation to take precedence over explanation. In their mutual rejection of

positivist social sciences, a first connection between hermeneutics and new materialism becomes apparent. Now, I believe that the exegesis of atheism's reductive hermeneutics brings us at an analytical level where a subject guarded against hubris can be theorized. At this moment, the question becomes one of ethics: what sort of ethical framework must re-orient the subject that has lost the ethical moorings provided by religion? We have stripped away from the subject what poisons its relation to nature and an affirmative hermeneutics can establish a new form of ethics. A true connection between hermeneutics and new materialist ontologies will be impossible since the first step of hermeneutics is always existential, from within the subject. However, as it was seen in the first chapter, if there is only one thing that social sciences must integrate from the challenge posed by new materialism it is a new relation to the natural world. In the contemporary context, any existential question cannot avoid taking nature into account.

Ricoeur offers an answer to the presented ethical and existential problem in the subject's relation to the concept of "word" and in the action of "hearkening". Once structures of prohibition have been removed a new opportunity to theorize the position of the subject within the world is opened. Ricoeur argues that at this bare level, before ethics, the subject must willingly open itself to the world. It is impossible to think always in affirmative terms, a negation opens up this new path.

> The only way to think ethically is first to think nonethically. In order to attain this goal, we must discover that place where the autonomy of our will is rooted in a dependence and an obedience that is no longer infected with accusation, prohibition, and condemnation. This preethical situation is that of "hearkening" [*l'écoute*]. In hearkening there is revealed a mode of being which is not yet a mode of doing and which thus avoids the alternative of subjection and revolt. (449)

We have seen in chapter two that the hermeneutic subject exist in a motion, continuously produced by the to-and-fro of interpretation of cultural texts taking form around it and ceaselessly informing its comprehension of itself. The reductive hermeneutics of atheism breaks down the hidden structures behind cultural texts and thus adds further uncertainty and suspicion around this subject-in-motion. The long citation above shows that prior to any culturally established prohibitions is a mode of nonethical understanding which comes out of the initial act of listening devoid of any moral duties. This initial act of listening, as a mode of being, implies no relation to a pre-existing order since listening always comes before obedience. Prohibition which makes one obey comes from the word of God. The weakened subject finds itself in this preethical situation where nothing has been said, but where everything can be said. The subject is provided with a clean slate on which a new ethics can be written inside its worldview. The Other is not instrumentalized here because the hermeneutic subject is primarily guided by an uncertainty regarding its own self-understanding. We can understand hearkening as the original mode of being before the moment when the motion of interpretation starts taking place. The first act of listening is followed by the first act of interpretation and then of understanding. Here is where Ricoeur's theory adds humility as a core principle. The subject does not have control of what comes to it in this first act, the first word holds agency over the subject.

> Word is not at my disposition, as are the instruments of work and production or the goods of consumption. In the occurrence of word I do not have anything at my command; I do not impose myself; I am no longer the master; I am led beyond the feelings of anxiety and concern. (449-450)

After word has been understood, the subject reacts and multiple forms of listening follow. One can refuse to listen or willingly follow the message of the word. However, no matter the following

action what is important is that a form of belonging is inevitably produced by hearkening. As one listens to a culture one further and further belongs to that culture and eventually understands oneself as being one of its integral parts. Hearkening as an initial position of weakness leads to a conscious and humble participation in a culture as it is interpreted. Here is where Ricoeur attempts to recover faith after the death of religion. This is not important for the goals of the current analysis, but this moment produces an ethics that can be compared to that of vital materialism: "I shall call this ethics that exists prior to the morality of obligation *an ethics of the desire to be or the effort to exist*." (452) This pre-religious ethics coming out of the work of Spinoza is conceptualized as an "unfolding of effort" (452). This concept, known as *conatus*, forms the true impulse behind ethical reasoning. Ricoeur uses conatus here simply to designate an affirmation of existence or a desire to be as a starting point prior to the act of listening. Again, Ricoeur uses this to criticize Kant's theorizing of obligation as an *a priori* that hides basic agentic desires – conatus, eros, the will to power. Formal obligation is simply "a second-order rationalization" (453). The true origin of ethics is in the relation of our conative existence and the agency of word.

> When we speak of word as a positive, *vital reality*, we are suggesting an underlying connection between word and the active core of our existence. Word has the power to change our understanding of ourselves. This power does not originally take the form of an imperative. Before addressing itself to the will as an order that must be obeyed, word addresses itself to what I have called our existence as effort and desire. We are changed, not because a will is imposed on our own will; we are changed by the "listening that understands." Word reaches us on the level of the symbolic structures of our existence, the dynamic schemes that express the way in which we understand our situation and the way in which we project ourselves into this situation. (454, italics my own)

At this point Ricoeur offers us a subject which is opened to be acted upon by unknown agencies. The analysis does not go further for Ricoeur is concerned with the words of the preacher which have the power to reinstate faith outside of the principle of formal obligation. This is where this chapter deviates from Ricoeur and brings the analysis back to new materialism. A long detour has provided us with a weakened subject which puts its faith in active listening. This listening corresponds to a conative effort to exist and opens up the power of word to mold the subject. In the face of the unknown, of an epistemological limit, the weakened subject accepts to listen without striving to explain. I have italicized the words *vital reality* in the citation above because they imply an agency adjacent to that of conatus – and for the evident link to Bennett's theory. Although Ricoeur does not suggest that words express a conative effort independently of the will of the one who utters them, we can nonetheless understand the hermeneutics he presents as being more than an inter-subjective philosophy. In fact, nothing is said about the subjectivity of the Other who utters or writes the words.

As seen in the third chapter, at its core, Bennett's vital materialism appoints a conative agency to materiality itself. Bennett suggests that "human culture is inextricably enmeshed with vibrant, nonhuman agencies, and [human] intentionality can be agentic only if accompanied by a vast entourage of nonhumans" (2010:109). The effort to exist theorized by Ricoeur is thus extended not only to other human subjectivities but also to all forms of materiality. For Bennett, conatus is expressed practically at the corporeal level in opposition to the theoretical existential level. The particularity of conative bodies is not only that they represent an effort to exist but also that this effort is contagious. They are "continuously affecting and being affected by other bodies." (Bennett 2010:21) These moments of encounter between bodies inform their reality, and the

assemblage of all bodies united during an encounter form a third larger body. Social and cultural structures are conceptualized as such larger bodies. For a singular body, conatus represents the effort to remain singular and for the aggregated forms it represents the inertia needed to maintain the form as it is. The dynamic movement that creates or maintains bodies together is theorized as follows.

> This maintenance is not a process of mere repetition of the same, for it entails continual invention: because each mode suffers the actions on it by other modes, actions that disrupt the relation of movement and rest characterizing each mode, every mode, if it is to persist, must seek new encounters to creatively compensate for the alterations or affections it suffers. What it means to be a "mode," then, is to form alliances and enter assemblages: it is to mod(e)ify and be modified by others. The process of modification is not under the control of any one mode—no mode is an agent in the hierarchical sense. (Bennett 2010:22)

This process is very similar to Ricoeur's understanding of word as affecting the core of being. The constant modifications that follow encounters is analogous to the subject formation that follows the humble act of listening. Now, Bennett speaks of practical, physical modification at the bodily level. To bring the analysis back to the level of hermeneutics it is necessary to understand subjectivity and word as bodies. Since I have already suggested that the hermeneutics described above may be more than an inter-subjective philosophy and considering that word is afforded an agency we may ask: *who* or *what* utters the agentic word? The hermeneutic subject confronted with nature, understood as a conative body, can willingly accept to be modified by nature only insofar as it has a voice. Interpretation survives if the agency of the natural world is conceptualized as the word of Nature.

Let us now recall Bennett's ethics of awe under *fractious holism* discussed in the third chapter. At the very end of that chapter, I presented Bennett's answer to the problem of appointing otherness to Nature: "we must acknowledge the gap between self and world, take responsibility for it, and seek to tread lightly upon nature where and when possible." (Bennett 1986:281) Now, hearkening may insert itself in this context to spotlight the need to pay attention to the failures of subjective interpretation. The resulting *fractious subject* is one who necessarily pays attention to the gap produced by such failures and acts consequently. Bennett's ethics of awe is thus very much related to Ricoeur's ethics of hearkening. However, a distance remains in the mind-body dualism since hearkening is purely at the intellectual level whereas Bennett puts forward awe as something that should be affectively understood throughout the body[8].

Working through problems similar to those presented in this thesis, Don Ihde (2009) theorizes a material hermeneutics which applied to an interpretation of the scientific and technological field, attempts to give a voice to that which does not have a voice. This post-linguistic hermeneutics functions by interpreting the agency of *things*, by imagining human qualities for these *things*. Ihde ends his *Peking University Lecture* on material hermeneutics with the following sentences: "[f]or the contemporary world, that which had not been visible can now become visible, and that which was unheard can now begin to be heard. Things, too, have or may

---

[8] More pragmatic authors such as Rainer Keller whose critique of new materialism was presented in the first chapter (Deleuze goes research) would certainly argue that the distance between hearkening and awe is solely theoretical and that there is no clear difference at the methodological level. This more practical problem is certainly important when any post-humanist theory is considered at the level of research methods.

be given voices." (Ihde 2009:80) This anthropomorphism can provide a final bridge between hermeneutics and new materialist theories. In fact, Bennett recognizes the radicality of her own project and does accept a certain human centrality in our thought processes. She suggests that in order to think through vital materialism we should adopt anthropomorphism as a heuristic device. Anthropomorphizing is something we constantly do, consciously or not. In a very hermeneutical fashion, we constantly interpret the world by comparing it to ourselves and to our perceptions. Bennett herself provides many examples of anthropomorphizing which oddly resembles Ihde's material hermeneutics.

> [Y]ou (mis)take the wind outside at night for your father's wheezy breathing in the next room; you get up too fast and see stars; a plastic topographical map reminds you of the veins on the back of your hand; the rhythm of the cicada's reminds you of the wailing of an infant; the falling stone seems to express a conative desire to persevere. (Bennett 2010:120)

And now, to answer the question we have posed at the very beginning: the subject that survives the challenge presented by the agency of the natural world is one who listens. A pre-ethical listening of the world's conative agency will produce a sense of belonging. The hermeneutic subject always understands itself as belonging to the cultural world and the mode of listening I have theorized here extends this sense of belonging to the natural world. Maybe this is too naïve, but "belonging to" should guard interpretation from self-centric understanding and a following utilitarian ethics. Whether one equates the agency of nature to that of humanity does not change this sense of belonging. It is also at that level that nature can be included in the interpretation of culture and vice-versa. Finally, the question of the validity of the completely

flattened ontology is not important here as it cannot be answered via the juxtaposition of hermeneutics and new materialism.

Conclusion

Inspired by Heidegger's terminology, Ricoeur often comes back to the concept of *holzweg*, a pathway, to define his philosophical inquiries for they rarely reveal a definitive answer and are much more concerned by the development of a reasoning process. I would say that it is thus the compilation of Ricoeur's many works that reveal some form of answer along the many pathways. This thesis itself is maybe a *holzweg*, a long detour that did not bring anything more than a new focus on the path itself, and that is to say the need to value anew the role of nature in the iterative production of culture. In a strikingly similar way, Bennett concludes her doctoral dissertation as follows: "I cannot now guarantee that this path leads anywhere one might want to go, but its appeal lies partly in the fact that its promise, still bathed in the shadows, has not yet disappointed." (Bennett 1986:257) I have accidentally arrived at a similar place in my analysis. Could I now say that I have found a meaningful connection or a true synthesis to clearly answer the question with which I started? No.

In this thesis, I have first argued for the need to follow new materialism in its desire to emphasize the role of materiality (nature, technology, or other). Without directly taking part in the ontological debate that follows the material turn, I suggest that the very existence of this movement is proof enough that social theory needs to find ways to lessen the importance of the human subject. Contrasting this claim, I have shown how Paul Ricoeur's model for social sciences emphasizes the importance of partial subjective interpretation. Then, in trying to connect subjective interpretation with the need to pay attention to natural forces, I came back to the points where vital materialism

and hermeneutics respectively critique the modern worldview. At the outset of this analysis, the thesis amounts to a plea for a weakened subject. When we consider the ethical agenda of new materialism and the interpretive approach to the analysis of culture side-by-side, we can imagine a humble subject willing to listen to the world outside itself to understand its own role in modifying it. Now, I cannot say that the Ricoeurian weak subject that I have presented, one who becomes visible through the long detour that is the analysis of atheism, represents the definitive subject that should ground social sciences. The analysis rather suggests that there is no such thing as a definitive answer. More simply my thesis represents an interesting and productive step in questioning how materiality and subjectivity intersect while also finding value in a revival of Paul Ricoeur's work.

Two books have been published since I have started working on this project: Jane Bennett's *Influx Efflux* (2020) and Don Ihde's *Material Hermeneutics* (2022). In many ways, the distance between these two books represents the distance that I attempted to bridge here. Both these books are far from being conclusive; both read as tentative, creative exercises in social theory. Both argue for the need to re-evaluate the roles of materiality and subjectivity in contemporary social theory without providing a definitive stance. The conversation in which this thesis inserts itself is thus very much in its infancy.

In *Material Hermeneutics*, Ihde aims at bridging the gap between explanation and understanding, between natural sciences and human sciences. Ihde's project is almost entirely concerned with the Diltheyan divide and with moving away from it.

> My aim here is to attack this binary explanation/understanding divide and to look instead at a radically revised notion of an expanded hermeneutic *praxis* that strongly includes *materiality*, material things in its scope, recognizing that the natural sciences have necessarily become more hermeneutical and showing how the human sciences would be enriched and changed if hermeneutics expanded materially. Metaphorically, a material hermeneutics "allows things to speak" with the implication that if we "listen," all narratives in all sciences, both natural and human, must change. (Ihde, 2022:2)

Ihde's own material turn is a hermeneutic philosophy of science that becomes a techno-science by focusing on the role of technical instruments. The central argument of *Material Hermeneutics* is that science has reached a point where it allows us to listen to the history of material things through the intermediary of technical instruments. Ihde makes this point by going through various examples of imaging technologies. The author suggests that the work of interpretation needs to be extended to all forms of inquiry, or rather, he asserts that interpretation has always been an integral but unacknowledged element of science. Science's hermeneutic turn is a new focus on the role of interpretation in discovery. Imaging technologies, new or old, are designed to let us view or hear more about materiality than what is visible at first sight. These technologies produce new affective elements that need to be interpreted for us to understand more about the studied materiality. Through examples such as the discovery of Ötzi, Europe's oldest mummy, or images of black holes, Ihde shifts the lexicon of hermeneutics to apply the act of interpretation to the materiality of scientific objects and instruments.

> Ötzi's copper axe "tells" us it was smelted, molded, and part of his material tool kit. His gut, with hop hornbean tree pollen tells us when he died. A black hole image shows us an event horizon and a chystalographic X-ray image "tells" us DNA is a shaped doubly as a helix, not triply. We must "trust" our instruments and must not be

Jesuit doubters. They can "speak" but only if we "hear" them. (Ihde 2022:34-35)

Ihde shows that imaging technologies present new information about scientific objects – like Otzi – but alone they do not explain the life of these objects. The images or other insights produced by the technologies themselves have a history of interpretation so that what we know about the scientific object changes as interpretation techniques are refined. The explanation/understanding dichotomy is visibly disrupted as hermeneutics and science become increasingly intertwined. Now, Ihde's theory clearly remains distant from post-human philosophies in that it relies on technical tools and human interpretation as intermediaries between the agencies of materiality and human subjectivity. Definitely interested by the work of his contemporaries – very much like Ricoeur – Ihde acknowledges the importance of post-human theories. He does not discuss new materialism but does comment on Harman's object-oriented ontologies and Meillassoux's speculative realism. For Ihde, these theories are important but remain "nostalgic" returns to pre-phenomenological philosophies and thus are uninteresting for a philosophy of science grounded in human experience.

On her side, Bennett questions subjectivity in her theory where unmediated affectivity always precedes. In her new book, Bennett picks up the question of the self she left generally unanswered in the last chapter of *Vibrant Matter*. In *Influx and Efflux*, the self represents a mediatory position between the affective inputs that come onto it, and the affective outputs it sends out into the world. In this work of creative theorizing, the poems of Walt Whitman are used as prompts to illustrate this fractious self standing between influx and efflux.

> This I […] is traversed by ambient sounds, smells, textures, words, ideas, and erotic and other currents, all of which comingle with previously internalized immigrants and become "touched" by them, until some of the incorporated and no-longer-quite-alien materials are "breathed" out as positions, dispositions, claims, and verse. (Bennett 2020: xiii)

As a political theorist, Bennett is interested in describing affective currents that traverse particulars selves and create the political mood of an era. She describes Whitman's treatment of *sympathy* as such an agentic stream in nineteenth century America. The self experiences sympathy as a current that enters it from the outside and motivates bodily reactions: "the phenomenology of sympathy pursued proceeds less by a logic of *projection* than of *dilation*—the opening wider of the pores of the body so as to receive more of the outside." (Bennett 2020: 32) The deliberate rejection of the word "projection" signifies a phenomenology that is not intersubjective since projection implies a negotiation of the signals received by the self from its others. The preferred "dilation" implies a fractious and reactive self that acts as a bodily passage through which the stream of affectivity is perpetuated. This theory does not negate the self as much as it asks it to consciously observe how its surroundings enter it and modify it. But also, the self is given the opportunity to creatively alter the current and to imagine how other agents – human or not – also participate in its evolution.

Coming from opposite directions, Bennett and Ihde arrive at very similar conclusions: Bennett asks us to listen to nature as it infects the self, and Ihde tells us that we can give voice to materiality and interpret its message. The foundational difference between these two approaches truly only stands in the point of departure. The first approach claims to start from outside of the human subject while the second is always grounded in the very language that is being heard and interpreted. This

distance remains. I cannot erase it, but I believe I went as far as possible it trying to minimize it. And now, I must end with the initial question that still cannot be avoided: can we really pretend that we can, in our analysis of our condition, step away from the circular and iterative interpretive motion that gives a life inside ourselves to the cultural and natural world outside ourselves?

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. 2008. "Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the 'New Materialism'." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 15(1):23-39.

Bennett, Jane. 1986. "Unthinking Faith and Enlightenment: Hegel and the impasse of modernity." PhD dissertation, Department of Political Science, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Bennett, Jane. 1993. "Primate Visions and Alter-Tales." Pp 250-65 in *In the Nature of Things*, edited by J. Bennett and W. Chaloupka. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bennett, Jane. 2016. *The Enchantment of Modern Life*. Princeton University Press.

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

Bennett, Jane. 2020. *Influx and Efflux: Writing up with Walt Whitman*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Boysen, Benjamin. 2018. "The Embarrassment of Being Human: A Critique of New Materialism and Object-Oriented Ontology." *Orbis Litterarum* 73:225-42.

Braidotti, Rosi. 2019. "A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities." *Theory, Culture & Society* 36(6):31-61.

Couldry, Nick and Andreas Hepp. 2017. *The Mediated Construction of Reality*. Cambridge: Polity.

Coole, Samantha and Diana Frost, eds. 2010. *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Crampton, Jeremy and John Krygier. 2006. "An Introduction to Critical Cartography." *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical* Geographies 4(1):11-33.

De Landa, Manuel. 2005. "The Geology of Morals". *Presentation at the Virtual Futures* 95.

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. [1991] 1994. *What is Philosophy?* Translated by H. Tomlinson and G. Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press.

Dolphijn, Rick and Iris Van der Tuin. 2012. *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies.* Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press.

Gamble, Christopher N., Joshua S. Hanan and Thomas Nail. 2019. "What is New Materialism?" *Angelaki* 24(6):111-34.

Fox, Nick. J. and Pam Alldred. 2016. *Sociology and the New Materialism: Theory, Research, Action*. London: Sage.

Fox, Nick. J. and Pam Alldred. 2018. "New materialism." in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Research Methods*, edited by P.A. Atkinson, S. Delamont, M.A. Hardy and M. Williams. London: Sage.

Fukuyama, Francis. 1989. "The End of History?" *The National Interest,* Summer 1989:1-18.

Haraway, Donna. 2006. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20th Century". Pp 117-158 In *The International Handbook of Virtual Learning Environments*. Dordecht: Springer.

Harman, Graham. 2014. "Objects and Orientalism." Pp 123-39 in *The Agon of Interpretations: Towards a Critical Intercultural Hermeneutics*, edited by Ming Xie. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Harman, Graham. 2018. *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything.* London: Pelican.

Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time.* Translated by J. Macquarie and E. Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell.

Ihde, Don. 1971. *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Ihde, Don. 1999. *Expanding Hermeneutics: Visualism in Science.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Ihde, Don. 2009. *Postphenomenology and Technoscience: The Peking University Lecture*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Ihde, Don. 2022. *Material Hermeneutics: Reversing the Linguistic Turn.* Milton Park: Routledge

Joas, Hans and Wolfgang Knöbl. 2009. *Social Theory: Twenty Introductory Lectures*. Translated by A. Skinner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kearney, Richard. 2004. *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva.* Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing.

Keller, Rainer. 2019. "New Materialism? A View from Sociology of Knowledge." Pp. 151-69 in *Discussing New Materialism: Methodological Implications for the Study of Materialities*, edited by U. Tikvah Kissmann and J. van Loon. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Le Guin, Ursula K. 2012. *The Tombs of Atuan.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Meillassoux, Quentin. 2008. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Translated by R. Brassier. New York: Continuum.

Michel, Johann. 2015. *Ricoeur and the Post-Structuralists*. Translated by S. Davidson. London: Rowman & Littlefield.

Phillips, Anne. 2015. *Politics of the Human.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Porter, Stanley E. and Jason Robinson. 2011. *Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Interpretive Theory*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.

Rekret, Paul. 2018. "The Posthumanist Tabula Rasa". *Research in Education*, 101(1): 25-29.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1969. *The Symbolism of Evil.* Translated by E. Buchanan. Boston: Beacon Press.

Ricœur, Paul. 1970. *Freud and Philosophy : An Essay on Interpretation*. Translated by D. Savage. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. [1974] 2007. *The Conflict of Interpretations*. Edited by D. Ihde. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. [1974] 2007a. "Existence and Hermeneutics." Translated by K. McLaughlin. Pp 3-24 in *The Conflict of Interpretations,* edited by D. Ihde. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. [1974] 2007b. "Structure and Hermeneutics." Translated by K. McLaughlin. Pp 27-61 in *The Conflict of* Interpretations, edited by D. Ihde. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. [1974] 2007d. "Heidegger and the Question of the Subject.". Pp 223-35 in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, edited by D. Ihde. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. [1974] 2007e. "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology." Translated by K. McLaughlin. Pp 236-66 in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, edited by D. Ihde. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. [1974] 2007f. "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: I." Translated by D. Savage. Pp 287-314 in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, edited by D. Ihde. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 287-314.

Ricoeur, Paul. [1974] 2007h. "Religion, Atheism, and Faith." Translated by C. Freilich. Pp 440-67 in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, edited by D. Ihde. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1978. "Can There Be a Scientific Concept of Ideology?" Pp 44-59 in *Phenomenology and the Social Sciences a Dialogue*, edited by J. Bien. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Ricoeur, Paul. [1981] 2016. *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences.* Edited by J. B. Thompson. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1996. *Fallible Man.* Translated by C. A. Kelbley. New York: Fordham University Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1992. *Oneself as Another*. Translated by K. Blamey. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1988. "The Human Being as the Subject Matter of Philosophy." *Philosophy & Social Criticism,*14(2):203-215.

Ricoeur, Paul. 2013. "The Problem of Hermeneutics." Translated by D. Pellauer. Pp 1-44 in *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures, Volume 2.* Cambridge: Polity.

Roberge, Jonathan. 2008. *Paul Ricoeur, la culture et les sciences humaines*. Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval.

Rosa, Hartmut, Christophe Henning and Arthur Bueno. 2022. *Critical Theory and New Materialisms.* Milton Park: Routledge.

Scott-Baumann, Alison. 2009. *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion*. London: Continuum.

Scott-Baumann, Alison. 2013. *Ricoeur and the Negation of Happiness*. London: Bloomsbury.

Scott-Baumann, Alison. 2019." Ricoeur on Plotinus: Negation and Forms of Populism." *Critical Hermeneutics,* 127-150.

Singh, Julietta. 2018. *No Archive Will Restore You*. Punctum Books.

Swedberg, Richard. 2012. "Theorizing in Sociology and Social Science: Turning to the context of discovery." *Theory and Society* 41:1-40.

Taylor, Charles. 1994. "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man." Pp 181-212 in *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Sciences,* edited by M. Martin and L. C. McIntyre. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Todd, Zoe. 2014. "Fish pluralities: Human-animal relations and sites of engagement in Paulatuuq, Arctic Canada". *ÉTUDES/INUIT/STUDIES* 38(1-2):217-238.

Todd, Zoe. 2016. "An indigenous feminist's take on the ontological turn: 'Ontology' is just another word for colonialism." *Journal of Historical Sociology 29*(1):4-22.

Vico, Giambattista. 1948. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*. Translated by T. Goddard Bergin and M. Harrold Fisch. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2014. *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*. London: Verso.