

1 Matter/Mind

The Persistence of Hierarchical Opposition in Karen Barad's Agential Realism Or: Why Move Beyond Dualism?

Introduction

In recent years a debate has developed regarding the question of whether new materialism really does move beyond fundamental dualisms such as that between culture and materiality, as its proponents purport (according to the contributors to this debate, namely Ahmed 2008; Bruining 2013; Davis 2009; Hinton/Liu 2015; Irni 2013; Sullivan 2012; van der Tuin 2008; Willey 2016; see also Coleman 2014; Davis 2014; Jagger 2015). Thus Sara Ahmed has argued that some writers associated with new materialism, such as Elizabeth Grosz, Elizabeth Wilson and Karen Barad, risk reproducing this dualism when they portray earlier feminist or poststructuralist work as having privileged culture one-sidedly to the detriment of an adequate account of materiality, which only new materialism is supposedly equipped to provide (Ahmed 2008; see also Bruining 2013; Hemmings 2011, 101; McNeil 2011, 436). Yet exactly what it is about such dualisms that makes it necessary to move beyond them from a feminist perspective is not spelled out by the contributors to this debate, with the exception of Peta Hinton (2013; see below). Accordingly, it is less than clear what theoretical strategies are most suited to accomplishing this goal.

Lena Gunnarsson (2013), while not a direct contributor to the debate on new materialism, has recently raised the question of what it means to transcend dualism. Addressing the work of a number of writers in the field of new materialism, such as Myra J. Hird and Celia Roberts (2011, 109) as well as Noela Davis (2009, 67), she notes a tendency on their part to conflate dualism with the mere act of drawing distinctions between, for instance, the human and the non-human. It is necessary, Gunnarsson asserts, to

“discriminate between *distinction or difference* on one hand and *dualism or binary opposition* on the other. In their conventional usage [...], dualisms or binaries refer to the kind of absolute separation which ignores any interconnection and mutual constitution between the two terms in question, while distinction simply means that two things are not the same, which does not imply they can be neatly separated from one another.” (2013, 14; emphasis in the original)

She adds that:

“Indeed, if we see distinctions as such as the problem, we rid ourselves of the possibility of examining the *relation* between the two terms and one will inevitably subsume the other. [...] It is when we reject any distinction that we fall prey to reductionism, such that human practices are seen as a matter only of either the natural or the social.” (Gunnarsson 2013, 14; emphasis in the original)

In Gunnarsson’s view, the risk of reductionism is exemplified by a recent tendency to downplay the difference between the human and non-human (2013, 13–14) in response to their previous stark separation.

In agreement with Gunnarsson’s argument, I would question whether diluting the distinction between matter and mind or materiality and discourse is a promising alternative to their binary conceptual arrangement. In this chapter I will explore that question focusing on Karen Barad’s approach of agential realism (2007; see also Gunnarsson 2017, 116, 119–120). Barad argues against hardwiring distinctions such as that between nature and culture or the human and the non-human into our theorizing (2003, 827–828). This does not

mean that agential realism erases differences per se. On the contrary, as Barad emphasizes, difference matters, it is of consequence: “Since different agential cuts materialize different phenomena – different marks on bodies – our intra-actions do not merely effect what we know [...]; rather, our intra-actions contribute to the differential mattering of the world” (2007, 178). But she advocates examining *how* distinctions are *generated* by apparatuses that intra-actively produce phenomena which they themselves are part of. This amounts to a genealogical inquiry which seeks to trace the production of differences that shape the world as we know it, rather than taking them for granted. For instance, Barad writes: “Refusing the anthropocentrism of humanism and antihumanism, *posthumanism* marks the practice of accounting for the boundary-making practices by which the ‘human’ and its others are differentially delineated and defined” (2007, 136; emphasis in the original). However, such inquiry provides no automatic answer to the normative question of whether we should continue to maintain the relevant distinctions or not. It is this question that I raise here with reference to the distinction between matter and mind.

What is problematic about dualistic theorizing and how can we move beyond it?

Barad seems equivocal about the prospect of dissolving the distinction between matter and mind rather than merely opposing a dualistic framing of this distinction. At times she insists that materiality and discourse mutually entail each other, rather than effacing the theoretical differentiation between them. For instance, she maintains that the organism named *brittlestar* engages in discursive practices no less than do humans through “boundary-drawing practices by which it differentiates itself from the [ocean, C.B.] environment with which it intra-acts and by which it makes sense of its world, enabling it to discern a predator, for example” (2007, 375). Barad clarifies in a footnote: “This is not to suggest that materiality and discourse are therefore to be

held as equivalent, but rather that the relationship is one of mutual entailment” (2007, 470, n. 44). Yet, elsewhere, she writes:

“The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics *that assumes an inherent difference* [emphasis added] between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse. *Onto-epistem-ology* [emphasis in the original] – the study of practices of knowing in being – is probably a better way to think about the kind of understandings that are needed to come to terms with how specific intra-actions matter.” (2003, 829)

This amounts to stating that there is no inherent difference between matter and discourse according to agential realism. We may ask: If we should not assume that there is an inherent difference between matter and discourse, then in what sense is Barad maintaining that their relationship can be specified as being one of mutual entailment, rather than of equivalence or even identity? If this is to be understood as an attempt to *reconstitute* the distinction in performative, non-essentialist terms, then Barad is still theoretically ambiguous about how to specify the difference between matter and discourse. She offers a definition of “discursive practices and material phenomena and the relationship between them” as follows (2003, 828): Discursive practices are “specific material (re)configurings of the world through which local determinations of boundaries, properties and meanings are differentially enacted”. Whereas matter “is substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency” (2003, 828). These definitions blur into each other to such an extent that matter(ing)-as-doing and discursive practice become indistinguishable. Hence, it is difficult to see how a relationship between them could be specified that does not ultimately involve equating the two.

Adding to the ambiguity in Barad’s writing as to how precisely (if at all) to distinguish between discourse and materiality, at times she colors the very notion of *distinction* (between these terms, along with others) in normatively negative terms. This relates to Gunnarsson’s observations about a similar tendency in the work of the new

materialist writers mentioned above. For instance, Barad's reading of Niels Bohr encompasses the argument that:

“Bohr's commitment to finding a way to hang on to objectivity in the face of the significant role of 'subjective elements' such as human concepts in the production of phenomena underlines his opposition to idealism and relativism. Apparatuses are not Kantian conceptual frameworks; they are physical arrangements. And phenomena do not refer merely to perception of the human mind; rather, phenomena are real physical entities or beings (though not fixed and separately delineated things). Hence I conclude that Bohr's framework is consistent with a particular notion of realism, *which is not parasitic on subject-object, culture-nature, and word-world distinctions.*” (2007, 129; emphasis added)

While Barad is here characterizing Bohr's philosophy rather than her own, the last sentence in the above quotation does entail a normative charge of disapproval of the distinctions mentioned, as fundamental theoretical distinctions. This would seem to indicate that she finds it desirable to transcend these distinctions (see also Gunnarsson 2017, 116, 119–120).

Similarly, Barad writes of the distinction between animate and inanimate matter:

“The inanimate-animate *distinction* is perhaps one of the most persistent *dualisms* in Western philosophy and its critiques; even some of the most hard-hitting critiques of the nature-culture *dichotomy* leave the animate-inanimate *distinction* in place. It takes a radical rethinking of agency to appreciate how lively even 'dead matter' can be.” (2007, 419, n. 27; emphasis added)

As in the previous quotation, here the term *distinction* carries a rather negative normative charge: Barad is in this passage clearly *critiquing* the distinction between 'animate' and 'inanimate' as such and, indeed, seems to be advocating the desirability of *overcoming* it. This would go significantly beyond advocating that we examine how the distinction has come into being.

How can we understand this tendency, manifest intermittently in Barad's work, of striving to dissolve or, at least, to blur theoretical distinctions that conventionally have been framed in dualistic terms, rather than – as stated at other points of her work – merely undertaking the investigation of their production? I suggest that we understand this tendency as a response to the problematization of dualism. In the above quotation from Barad, we may observe the same slippage between the terms *dualism* and *distinction* which Gunnarsson has identified in some other new materialist writing. Given this slippage, it is worth asking what it is about dualism that renders it problematic from a feminist perspective and what would be the most promising strategy for moving beyond the problem(s) identified. While there is probably a consensus within feminist theory that dualism is problematic, the question I have just posed has been answered in different ways by different feminists (see Butler 1990, 7–13, for a concise analysis). Therefore, discussion of appropriate ways of responding to dualism necessitates being specific about one's analysis as to precisely what makes it objectionable. Unfortunately, I find such specification to be missing both from Barad's writing and from the debate about new materialism, opened by Ahmed, to which this chapter seeks to contribute.

Hinton is the only participant in this debate to specify any reason as to why a dualistic approach to matter (in particular) should be problematic. On this subject she states:

“[F]ar from recuperating binary terms in order to show what is at stake regarding matter, Barad urges us to consider the productive efforts of binarism at the same time that *we must concede to the im/possibility of a nature/culture dualism* in the first instance, *a claim which is made on the basis of a fundamental rethinking of the nature of difference that quantum mechanics introduces to the body of feminist theory* that engages with these questions.” (2013, 180–181; emphasis added)

Why must we ‘concede to the im/possibility of a nature/culture dualism’? How does quantum mechanics render such a dualism untenable? While Hinton does not answer these questions directly, her reading of Barad seems to entail an objection to dualism based

ultimately upon experimental findings such as the ones Barad recounts in some detail in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007). That is to say, Hinton's view is that it is because quantum mechanics as read by Barad shows the nature/culture dualism to be *empirically inaccurate* that we should strive to move beyond it in our theorizing.

By contrast, my view is that the chief problem with dualistic thinking is not the empirical inaccuracies entailed in any particular dualism, nor even the lack of theoretical complexity involved in dualistic thinking, in general (see Gunnarsson 2017). Instead, I regard the main problem with dualistic thinking as being its enmeshment with *relations of domination and exclusion*. That is, it is for ethico-political reasons first and foremost that I find the project of moving beyond dualistic discourses crucial. With this view I follow a broad line of analysis of the problematic of dualism, or of 'binary opposition' (as it was more commonly referred to at the time), that has been established within Cultural Studies in the late twentieth century in the light of deconstruction. The line of analysis I am referring to has been articulated in the 1990s within feminist and queer as well as postcolonial theory (e.g. Bhabha 1994; Butler 1990, Ch. 1; Spivak 1990), for instance. Ernesto Laclau provides a succinct elucidation of the relevant understanding as to how dualism is implicated in relations of power that are hierarchizing as well as exclusionary. He writes:

"Derrida has shown how an identity's constitution is always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles – [...] man/woman etc. In linguistics a distinction is made between 'marked' and 'unmarked' terms. The latter convey the principal meaning of a term, while marked terms add a supplement or mark to it. [...] In this respect, we could say that the discursive construction of secondariness is based on a difference between two terms where one maintains its specificity, but where this specificity is simultaneously presented as equivalent to that which is shared by both of them. The word 'man' differentiates the latter from 'woman' but is also equated with 'human being' which is the condition shared by both men and women. What is peculiar to the second term is

thus reduced to the function of accident, as opposed to the essentiality of the first. It is the same with the black-white relationship, in which ‘white’, of course, is equivalent to ‘human being’. ‘Woman’ and ‘black’ are thus marks, in contrast to the unmarked terms of ‘man’ and ‘white’” (1990, 32–33).

Binary or dualistic conceptual frameworks such as the opposition man/woman thus tend to be *hierarchical* (in the sense of “unegalitarian”) in virtue of privileging one of the terms as intrinsically superior. By “intrinsically superior” I mean to designate a reified form of normative evaluation, which – rather than marking the act of evaluation as such – imputes an objective superiority or inferiority to the term(s) being construed in the relevant ways (see chapter 5 for further discussion of normativity and antinormativity). This enables an essentialized standing, within hegemonic discourses, of terms such as ‘man’ or ‘white’ as putatively independent of their respective Other(s), such as ‘woman’ or ‘black’, as elucidated by Laclau in the above quotation.

As has been well-established by feminist writers of various theoretical orientations, any dualisms within Western discourses, scholarly and otherwise, are gendered in that their respective poles are coded as masculine vs. feminine (see e.g. Benjamin 1988; Bordo 1986; Flax 1993). This includes the dualisms most debated within new materialism, such as between culture and nature, discourse and materiality, as well as between the human and the non-human. Indeed, male-biased discourses tend to operate by normatively privileging whichever term in a given dualism is coded as the masculine pole in a reified form, as detailed above. This is why seeking to move beyond dualism by effacing or blurring the relevant distinctions as such runs the risk of reproducing heteronormative order by privileging either pole (whether it be the pole marked as ‘masculine’ or the one marked as ‘feminine’ within such order) – in line with Gunnarsson’s argument that “if we see distinctions as such as the problem, we rid ourselves of the possibility of examining the *relation* between the two terms and one will inevitably subsume the other” (2013, 14; emphasis in the original). For instance, even if – like Barad – we undertake to move beyond the

distinction between mind and matter, it may be that the conceptual outcome privileges either mind or matter in such a way that one pole is understood reductively in terms of the other. Thus, Barad (2007, 64, 151, 232) has critiqued Judith Butler's (1993) account of materiality on the grounds that it reduces the latter to an effect of culture, even as this account strives to reformulate the mind/matter relationship in a non-dualistic way. Whether such reduction occurs in a way which one-sidedly privileges mind *or* matter, we risk losing what is specific to the other term, respectively. With a view to heteronormative and male-dominated social orders, regardless of whether we efface gendered distinctions in terms that privilege the 'masculine' *or* the 'feminine' side of a given dualism in a manner that reifies either term as superior or intrinsically more relevant, we will have failed truly to transcend the relevant dualism. The understanding of dualism or binary opposition being detailed here sets apart *supremacist* discourses such as masculinist ones from forms of normative evaluation, as found in certain (though by no means all) feminisms, that would draw distinctions, even value-laden ones, without reifying the normative priorities involved. 'Normative' within this book is meant simply to designate any value-coded construction. I am assuming that any discursive (and thus any theoretical) practice inescapably entails a normative dimension. (See also chapters 4 and 5.)

What sense of ethics is entailed in agential realism?

If, as I have argued, the theoretical project of moving beyond dualism, in general, is best viewed as being motivated ethically and politically, then we need to ask what the *ethico-political* reason is for moving beyond the opposition between discourse and materiality, in particular. What reason does Barad give for her project of doing so? Certainly she presents agential realism as an ethical project. Thus she introduces it

“as an epistemological-ontological-ethical framework that provides an understanding of the role of human *and* nonhuman, material

and discursive, and natural *and* cultural factors in scientific and other social-material practices, thereby moving such considerations beyond the well-worn debates that pit constructivism against realism, agency against structure, and idealism against materialism” (2007, 26; emphasis in the original).

What notion of ethics is entailed in this framework? It is a notion that incorporates all forms of matter into the realm of ethics. Agential realism assumes a “distribution of agency over human, nonhuman, and cyborgian forms” (2007, 218) and posits that “we’ are not the only active beings” (2007, 391). Instead, everything that partakes in the becoming of the universe is seen to be actively involved in that process. In particular, this encompasses both animate and inanimate matter, which accordingly is considered by Barad to be alive, as we saw earlier. In virtue of being “agentive” (2007, 177–178), *everything* is accountable to the specific materializations – the phenomena – of which it forms a part, as what becomes at any one moment matters for any subsequent developments (2007, 91, 178–179, 184–185, 340).

In the ethics entailed in Barad’s approach, what are conventionally referred to as things or objects are thus both themselves considered accountable and are considered to form part of that to which we (humans and, specifically, scholars) are accountable. But what notion of accountability is involved here? Nowhere in her book-length exposition of agential realism does Barad (2007) elaborate what it might possibly mean either to be accountable to a thing, an object, or to consider an object accountable. In the absence of any such explanation, I would insist that the notion of ethics makes sense only in relation to subjects – understood, not in a humanist sense but, instead, as encompassing all that is capable of experience, and therefore, of suffering. It is the possibility of their suffering that makes us responsible to sentient beings in particular. It is this possibility that makes it wrong to relate to subjects in the stated sense as if they were objects. By contrast, to feel responsible or accountable to what can be affected ontologically but not experientially – for instance, when being destroyed – seems to me to involve a projection of the said feature of subjectivity onto objects,

understood along these lines as what does not care, even about 'its own' becoming or unbecoming.

To be sure, the question can be raised as to how we can be certain that any matter exists which is purely object in this sense. It is not my purpose to preclude from ethical consideration what is conventionally referred to as inanimate, non-living matter. My purpose instead is to defend an understanding of ethics as being tied by definition to vulnerability. Such an understanding emerges, for instance, from Butler's work (2004a; 2005; 2010), which for this very reason can be considered as posing a challenge to the ethics formulated by Barad. Butler has repeatedly critiqued forms of politics (particularly by the U.S.) that exploit the fact that subjects are exposed to one another in ways they cannot fully control, along with the fact that vulnerability is distributed highly unevenly across the globe (e.g. 2004a, 28–32). Her theorization of the subject emphasizes these particular features of what she refers to as “[p]recarious [l]ife” (2004a, title; emphasis added). We can derive from her work a notion of ethics according to which ethical striving responds to a concern to minimize suffering of any kind, to avoid contributing to its coming-about or aggravation as far as possible, and to struggle for the achievement and sustenance of conditions in which the *needs* of sentient beings are taken care of, such that they may live or even thrive rather than merely survive (cf. Butler 2012a, 15) or even die.

My disagreement with Barad, then, does not turn on the fact that she questions the distinction between animate and inanimate matter per se. Instead it concerns the *grounds* on which she views 'dead matter' as alive. Whereas I consider the capacity for experience to be definitive of life as relevant to ethical consideration – *whether or not this encompasses all forms of matter* – such capacity seems not to figure in Barad's understanding of life, nor of ethics. Instead, life, as well as accountability, in her view seem to be defined in terms of the agentive role (e.g. Barad 2007, 177–178) which she attributes to all matter, whether conventionally viewed as 'animate' or 'inanimate'. Thus agency in her account “is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity” (Barad 2007, 177). Rather, “agency is the space of

possibilities opened up by the indeterminacies entailed in exclusions” (2007, 182) – exclusions as constitutive of all materialization according to her (2007, 177, 393–394). Barad frames agency in terms of an enactment (2007, 178) rather than an attribute (2007, 141). It appears to be its active involvement in the becoming of the universe, then, that makes ‘dead matter’ alive in her view. Accordingly, she asserts that: “There is a vitality to the liveliness of intra-activity, not in the sense of a new form of vitalism, but rather in terms of a new sense of aliveness” (2007, 177). In a footnote she adds: “This new sense of aliveness applies to the inanimate as well as the animate, or rather, it is what makes possible the very distinction between the animate and the inanimate” (2007, 437, n. 81). Just what it is that endows this aliveness with *ethical* significance remains unclear, however.

I would argue, then, that the criterion whereby Barad frames life and – seemingly as a result – accountability as encompassing all forms of matter fails to provide a convincing reason for her incorporation of all matter into the sphere of ethics. She thus neglects to specify an ethical or political reason for the project of moving beyond the dualisms of animate/inanimate matter and of matter/mind. A plausible ground for seeking to do so in my view is that we cannot rule out the possibility that all matter is sentient in some sense. Yet, as I have pointed out, the capacity for experience in virtue of which sentient being is exposed to the possibility of suffering does not figure in Barad’s theory. Instead, it is only the capacity of all matter for activity that accounts for the liveliness which Barad attributes to all matter, including inanimate matter.

‘Merely passive’?

In fact, *passivity* is a quality that is strangely devalued by Barad. This devaluation is entailed in the argument upon which she bases her entire theoretical approach: the argument that matter, like mind (or derivatively, discourse, culture and so on), is active and not passive. Thus she writes:

“Nature is neither a passive surface awaiting the mark of culture nor the end product of cultural performances. The belief that nature is mute and immutable and that all prospects for significance and change reside in culture is a reinscription of the nature/culture dualism that feminists have actively contested.” (2003, 827)

“For all Foucault’s emphasis on the political anatomy of disciplinary power, he too fails to offer an account of the body’s historicity in which its very materiality plays an *active* role in the workings of power. This implicit reinscription of matter’s passivity is a mark of extant elements of representationalism that haunt his largely post-representationalist account.” (2003, 809; emphasis in the original)

Barad’s devaluation of passivity accords with hegemonic, male-supremacist¹ discourse, which feminizes that attribute. This forms a case in point illustrating my earlier argument that to seek to transcend dualism by eliding distinctions does not necessarily rescue us from reproducing the hierarchical arrangement underpinning the opposition concerned. Thus, it would seem in this instance that declaring nature or matter to be just as active, or similarly active, as culture or mind – a declaration found in new materialism more generally and articulated much earlier by Donna Haraway² – reinforces the privilege which activity tends to be accorded vis-à-vis passivity within masculinist discourses. This is to seek to undo one gendered opposition by reinforcing another one.

This attempt is all the less felicitous as a feminist political strategy considering that passivity is a constitutive dimension of experience. It is by virtue of their exposure to what is beyond their control that sentient beings are exposed to the possibility of suffering. I make this claim, again, with Butler’s theorizing in mind, which emphasizes our simultaneous formation by, and subjection to, power *along with*

1 I borrow this term from Nancy Fraser (2013, 9).

2 See Haraway (1991, 197–200) as well as Alaimo and Hekman (2008, 4–7); Bennett (2010, esp. 34); Coole and Frost (2010, 8–9); Davis (2009, 73); Hird (2004, 228); Kirby (2011, 66).

the (limited) agency that is generated in virtue of the constitution of subjects.³ When she writes of our exposure to violence, for instance, she emphasizes not solely our responsibility in the face of this (2004a, 16) but – simultaneously – the de-constituting force we are subject to:

“Violence is surely a touch of the worst order, a way a primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another.” (2004a, 28–29)

It is with a view to such a sense of being ‘given over, without control’ that I am suggesting that to be exposed to experiences we cannot (fully) choose lends a dimension of passivity to the very capacity for experience – a dimension that is prominent in the vulnerability which Butler proposes humans share (2004a, Ch. 2).

Passivity in this sense may be traumatic, but there is no reason to *devalue* it in terms of a discourse that would position it as inferior vis-à-vis activity. Rather than privileging the latter term over the former, and rather than dichotomizing both qualities against each other (as in the suggestion that all that exists is essentially active *rather than* passive), it should be possible to recognize both, in non-dualistic and non-hierarchizing terms, as forming features of sentient existence.

I would argue, in fact, that unless we question the hierarchical opposition active/passive (as instantiated in Barad’s discourse), it will be impossible fully to extricate matter from its hierarchical opposition to mind. For, as Barad also implies, it is *in virtue of* the attribution of ‘mere passivity’ (as a negative attribution) to matter that the latter historically has been devalued. Yet her strategy of argument effectively amounts to reinscribing in a reified form the normative privilege which activity and agency have historically been accorded vis-à-vis passivity. This is the case inasmuch as nowhere in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) does she justify or even recognize the fact that the argument

3 See esp. Butler (2015b, 14–16); cf. note 11 to this chapter.

upon which she bases her theoretical approach, as paraphrased above, accords more value to activity than to passivity.

In my own analysis, the rationale based on which matter has historically been devalued vis-à-vis mind is that matter, being merely passive, is *mere object*. As Barad seems to agree, subjectivity in Western discursive convention has often been defined over and against ‘mere objects’ – or ‘mere matter’, as she would be more likely to put it – as superior in virtue of being associated with activity and agency. This, I would argue, forms the essence of the subject/object dualism which is so fundamental to the hierarchical set-up in which difference is thought in much hegemonic discourse:⁴ The category ‘object’ within Western-style theorizing has figured as Other⁵ or as the constitutive outside⁶ to the category ‘subject’ – a term which has tended to be reserved for human beings.

As a feminist, I consider to be fundamentally problematic and unconvincing the association of the status of subject with an agency or activity defined over and against the passivity associated with ‘mere objects’ (or ‘mere matter’) – albeit on different grounds than Barad’s. Rather than seeking to recognize the agentic capacity of matter, thus expanding the notions of agency and activity to apply to all that exists, I find it ethically necessary to ask the following questions: On what grounds is passivity inferiorized, i.e. culturally disregarded, in the Western imagination? What kind of discursive logic and what ethico-politics are entailed in defining subjects’ imputed difference from, and superiority to, objects in terms that identify the latter with an abjected passivity? And why would passivity be attributed to *objects* or matter more readily than to subjects, as Barad suggests? Are passivity and the predicament of being exposed to the doings of subjects or other forces particular to objects? Obviously not.

I propose that, instead, the masculinist, bourgeois, Eurocentric subject of Western philosophy (understood in the sense of a discursive

4 See e.g. Benjamin (1988); Ferguson (1993).

5 Cf. Spivak (1985, 247).

6 Cf. Butler (1993, 3).

position of subjectivity) arrives at considering himself a subject *on the basis of* abjecting passivity as Other. The category 'object' figures as a screen or receptacle for Man's projection of his own sense of vulnerability, which he disavows. Objects are thus defined as what the subject 'is not', i.e. does not wish to be. Inferiorizing passivity seems to hark back to a discursive logic whereby to be active *rather than* passive – that is, to polarize both attributes against one another whilst equating one term with 'self' and negating its counterpart – is to assign superior value to a 'subject' *on grounds of his self-imputed strength or power to act*; in binary opposition to what is exposed *to* the actions of others. Passivity here seems to be coded in terms of weakness and vulnerability – an exposure, ultimately, to *others'* power or agency. The widespread association of patriarchy, racism and other (intersecting) systems of domination with an *objectification* of subjects would seem to make sense in terms of this discursive logic, that is, in terms of the idea that to be a subject is to be worth more than an object *because one is capable of activity or has 'agency'* (which endowment these systems of domination disavow in their respective Others).

In order to undo the subject/object dualism, thus understood, it is necessary to take account of subjects' exposure to what they cannot control,⁷ and hence, of the capacity for experience which is constitutive of the vulnerability that comes with being a subject. This is irrespective of whether this category is taken to have an empirical counterpart, that is, of whether any such thing as a pure 'object', devoid of experience, actually exists. It is only on account of an empathy with what might possibly suffer that ethical concern makes sense.⁸

7 Cf. Butler (2004a; 2005; 2010).

8 Cf. Puig de la Bellacasa (2010, 158–159). Much as empathy is often invoked in politically problematic ways that sustain rather than disrupt social inequality (Berlant 2004; Pedwell 2012a, 2012b, 2013), and so is by no means necessarily ethical, I would maintain that ethics cannot do without empathy, in the sense that a refusal of empathy in many cases negates the possibility of an ethical practice. I follow Butler in emphasizing the destructive and potentially deadly effects of refused identification (1997, 137, 148–149; 2009, 78, 92) as well as – by extension – of refused empathy. As Carolyn Pedwell notes, empathy is closely

Subjectivity beyond the subject/object dualism

For the above reasons, it would seem to be impossible to overcome the mind/matter dualism unless we reframe the notion of subjectivity in a way consonant with the concern to include within this category all that might possibly be exposed to suffering – that is, in a way which acknowledges subjects' passive exposure to what is beyond their control as definitive of their predicament. By the same token, it is by disentangling the notion of passivity from its displacement onto objects and, thus, onto matter (especially inanimate matter) that these latter concepts can be extricated from the reified, hierarchical opposition of subject vs. object in which they historically have been framed, as I have argued. When we conceive of subjectivity inclusively in terms of *all* sentient being's exposure to experience, and thus to the possibility of suffering, this term would itself seem no longer to be defined by a subject/object dualism that (as analyzed in the previous section) makes for a *supremacist notion* of subjectivity as essentially superior to objects. I see no necessary reason why subjectivity would require the notion of object as its counterpart, even though I do not in principle oppose the possibility of retaining the category of object for forms of matter – which may or may not exist – that might be established in some sense to be non-sentient. Even if such a category were retained, on

associated with identification (2012b, 282). The notion of refused identification can thus alert us to the selectivity with which empathy is extended to certain subjects while being refused others. To be refused identification and empathy is, on this understanding, to be consigned to the status of the unintelligible; of the “less than human” (Butler 2004b, 218) or – as I prefer to put it in less anthropocentric terms – of ‘life unworthy of life’. As such, the systematic refusal of empathy to certain groups of living beings is associated with biopolitical dividing practices that would differentiate between beings ‘worthy of life’ vs. those considered, in the most extreme case, “killable” (Haraway 2008, 75–79). I suggest that an ethico-political assessment of empathy should turn on whether its specific articulation and mode of operation in any one context tends more towards stabilizing or towards challenging relations of inequality and domination, both of which are possible scenarios.

this understanding it would no longer be inferiorized as subjectivity's Other.

This is what differentiates a *hierarchical opposition* enmeshed in relations of domination and exclusion from a *distinction* which turns on a criterion unrelated to notions of an intrinsic superiority vs. inferiority: The subject/object dualism as elucidated in the previous section operates according to a normative logic that, in imputing superior value to what is capable of activity as compared to what (supposedly) is not, is both masculinist and – ultimately – biopolitical. I here use the term “biopolitical” in the sense that different forms of life or ‘dead matter’ are hierarchically ranked in terms of their imputed *value* (cf. Butler 2012a, 10). This is in contrast with a notion of subjects which – if distinguished from objects at all – turns on a need for protection that is derived, not from any notion of value or *worthiness* of protection but, instead, from subjects’ capacity for suffering. In the latter case, what is at work is an ethics based on need and not on a notion of worth.

The account of matter upon which Barad bases her argument that matter merits scholarly attention and recognition by feminists seems to mimic the supremacist logic which I have problematized as being masculinist and biopolitical.⁹ Consider the following two statements by her:

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- 9 I would note that to analyze a given practice as masculinist, biopolitical or, indeed, as dualistic does not automatically amount to engaging in a dualistic practice oneself. Whereas I have been analyzing Barad's theoretical discourse as masculinist in its reifying devaluation of passivity – which it shares with other masculinist discourses that put to work a dualistic distinction between *active* and *passive* – my own normative distinction between masculinist and feminist discourse abstains from promoting as superior either what is conventionally masculinized or feminized. Instead I seek to engage in a form of feminist practice that self-consciously prioritizes an egalitarian and non-reifying mode of normativity (see chapter 5 for more detail), along with a relational form of analysis. By this I mean that, rather than treating either term in any conceptual pair as self-sufficient and intrinsically superior – a characteristic of dualism as analyzed earlier – I seek to treat both sides of the relevant distinction in terms of a *relationship* in which one term features as the dominant one, without either maintaining or inverting the hierarchy involved.

“By ‘posthumanist’ I mean to signal the crucial recognition that nonhumans play an important role in naturalcultural practices, including everyday social practices, scientific practices, and practices that do not include humans.” (Barad 2007, 32)

“Crucial to understanding the workings of power is an understanding of the nature of power in the fullness of its materiality. To restrict power’s productivity to the limited domain of the ‘social,’ for example, or to figure matter as merely an end product rather than an active factor in further materializations, *is to cheat matter out of the fullness of its capacity.*” (Barad 2003, 810; emphasis added)

In the latter quotation, power is equated with capacity – the capacity that Barad finds us at risk of cheating matter out of – in a way which celebrates the capacity or power of matter as worthy and meriting recognition, if not admiration. I find Barad’s apparent admiration for the capacity or power of matter to resonate uneasily with biopolitical discursive logics that would base recognition vs. a refusal of recognition upon judgments regarding a putative intrinsic value of life, as elucidated above. In contrast with a notion of life as intrinsically valuable or as devoid of specific value, I would assert that *vulnerability* is what is in need of recognition – a form of recognition that is discursively aligned with a concern to protect, rather than with admiration for strength.¹⁰

Similarly, with reference to the first of the two quotations above, would not recognizing matter for its important role in naturalcultural practices merely entail the extension to ‘creation’ as a whole of the colonialist logic of hierarchizing against each other capacities – and, thus, the beings with which they are associated – in terms of their

10 The notion of protection, while it potentially incorporates that of self-protection, nonetheless may involve a paternalistic distinction between what protects and what will be protected. I cannot address this problem within the scope of this book, but I suggest that the ethical necessity of protecting precarious lives (cf. Butler 2004a) is not obviated by the potential for paternalistic domination which is raised by asserting such necessity.

supposed contribution to ‘civilization’? It would seem preferable that we, as subjects of theoretical discourse as much as of practical politics, should strive to leave behind the very logic of assigning importance to entities or forces based on their contribution to natural/cultural – or indeed to any – practices. Such logic would seem, problematically, to be indebted to the liberal notion of ‘merit’ and its flipside: the notion of ‘life unworthy of life’. Moreover, extending the notion of merit from its conventional application to human subjects to apply to nature as a whole would amount to anthropomorphizing the latter.

Conclusion

I have argued that Barad’s tendency – at least intermittently – to dilute the distinction between matter and mind (along with that between animate and inanimate matter), or to color such distinctions in normatively negative terms, falls short of accomplishing what is needed in order to overcome the hierarchical character of the dualisms of subject vs. object and, by extension, of matter vs. mind. Agential realism fails to challenge the hierarchical conceptual arrangement based on which matter historically has been construed as inferior to mind or the human subject. It does not tackle the devaluation of passivity which has been problematically associated with matter or objects more readily than with mind or subjects. If we want to disentangle these notions from the hierarchizing thrust which they acquire when framed in terms of the subject/object dualism, we need to target the reified character of the active/passive opposition which accounts for the inferiorization of both ‘objects’ and ‘matter’.

As I have suggested, we can do so by reconceptualizing subjectivity in non-hierarchizing terms. There would be no need, then, to abandon the distinctions either between subjects and objects or between mind and matter in order to extricate these notions from hierarchical thinking and its implication in unequalitarian social orders. Moreover, the abandonment of either of these distinctions would not necessarily achieve that goal. On the contrary, as I have argued, effacing or blurring

distinctions does not necessarily eliminate the hierarchical framing that binary oppositions tend to entail. As noted above, Barad's strategy of highlighting the agentic role of all matter comes at the cost of continuing the devaluation of passivity. As a result, the ethical rationale for moving beyond the dichotomy between mind and matter in the first place remains obscure: What is to be gained by this undertaking if the underlying hierarchy is left intact?

In line with Gunnarsson's argument elucidated earlier, I contend that reconceptualizing matter and mind in non-hierarchizing, non-dualistic ways might involve exploring other ways of relating these terms to one another than either opposing or mutually assimilating them. Arguably, Barad opts for the latter possibility in highlighting matter's and mind's shared agentic role. However, this may obscure or elide important differences between the senses in which various forms of matter and mind, respectively, might be agentic. For instance, it is not clear that all matter is agentic in a sense associated with an ability to be held accountable. Even if matter were accountable, there remains the problem of how we conceive of such accountability and whether we are using this term in the same sense we do in referring to adult human beings as accountable. We must consider that there may be quite different senses of the terms 'agency' and 'accountability' at work in these respective contexts. Rather than eliding the differences between these, as a corollary of eliding the distinction between mind and matter, I suggest that a more promising strategy would move beyond a dualistic framing of this distinction by opening up different meanings of 'activity' as well as 'passivity' in contexts involving different forms of matter and mind.¹¹

11 For instance, subject formation and its imbrication with material supports would seem to involve passivity and activity on either side – both the side of the emerging subject and that of “technologies, structures, institutions” (and much else) that forms part of the “conditions of emergence” of a subject (Butler 2015b, 14). As Butler puts it, “[a] support must *support*, and so both be and act” (Butler 2015b, 14; emphasis in the original). Likewise, she writes of the “localized field of impressionability” that is the emerging subject that it is “[a]cted on, animated, and acting; addressed, animated, and addressing;

Overall, I highlight the risk of negating or understating differences which is involved in striving to overcome dualism by emphasizing sameness or similarity. There is a reductionism entailed in this, which Gunnarsson (2013) has pointed out. Moreover, from an ethical perspective, this could be an assimilatory move that may well underestimate power differentials in the rather different senses of ‘agency’.¹² Considering adult human agency as qualitatively different from other kinds of agency may mean marking human *privilege* rather than a fictive human superiority. Such privilege is easily erased from view by the new materialist emphasis upon likeness or similarity (between human and non-human, culture and nature, animate and inanimate) at the cost of giving due attention to specificity and difference.

touched, animated, and now sensing. These triads are partially sequential and partially chiasmic” (Butler 2015b, 14–15). Yet the simultaneous involvement of activity and passivity on both sides of this connection does not necessarily mean that inanimate supports, such as the materials with which a baby is cleaned, fed, etc., are either active (crying, smiling, etc.) or passive (impressionable) in the same sense as either the baby or its caretakers are.

- 12 This is illustrated by the neglect of such power differentials, and of different degrees of *mutual* engagement, in the following statements by Barad: “Humans’ and ‘brittlestars’ learn about and co-constitute each other through a variety of brittlestar-human intra-actions” (2007, 381–382). “As we entertain the possibilities for forming partnerships with brittlestars and other organisms for biomimetic projects, we are co-constituting ourselves into assemblages that ‘mimic’ (but do not replicate) the entanglements of the objects we study and the tools that we make” (2007, 383).