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# Our Becoming-Posthuman: the Delight of Material Entanglement

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A posthumanist material feminist philosophy allows us to challenge the anthropocentric point of view by rejecting human exceptionalism and emphasizing the material embeddedness and interconnectivity of all beings. Rosi Braidotti's notion of "zoe-egalitarianism," for example, embraces and values all life and rejects any form of exceptionalism. Posthumanists call for a new ontology and a shift in our thinking about who/what we are and how we exist with the multitude of others with whom we are always related in order to move us away from harmful Humanist ontologies. Conceptualized as a mangle (Hekman 2014), a biocultural creature (Frost 2016), an exposed subject (Alaimo 2016), or a transjective being (Daigle 2017, 2018), the posthuman is still in the process of becoming.

The "becoming posthuman" that I gesture to, along with posthumanist material feminists, is a matter of acknowledging and embracing our being as posthuman, as the radically entangled and interconnected being we are and always have been, one that emerges from a manifold of affects, tensions, and relations and is constructed by them albeit always in flux, being done and undone by this web of relations, including its own relation to it. Our material entanglement with other humans, non-humans, living or non-living beings, renders us vulnerable. I argue that this is not to be understood negatively as it is generative of a new type of ethos and ethical responsibility, one that may lead to the enhanced flourishing of life in all its instances. Beyond accepting and embracing our entanglement, we must actively work toward affirming and taking delight in it. What is at stake here is building the foundation for a radically material understanding of our posthuman entanglement upon which we can elaborate ethical and political modes of thinking that foster our thriving and the unfolding of life in the mode of delight.

Taking insights from the existential feminist phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir which I have inquired extensively and taking in consideration the material feminist critique that has been articulated in recent years, I propose that we are transjective beings, that is concomitantly transsubjective and transobjective. We are always caught up in a field of tensions and forces, being done and undone, both by ourselves and by other beings we are entangled with, doing and undoing

them as well, both subjectively and materially.<sup>1</sup> We are assemblages of experiences, consciousness, materiality, and so forth, and we exist in a flat ontological plane in which human exceptionalism is rejected and agency attributed to all beings. I form this concept by appealing to notions of radical material entanglement to be found in the works of Jane Bennett, Stacy Alaimo, Nancy Tuana, and Samantha Frost, among others.

A posthumanist material feminist philosophy allows us to think materiality and trans-objectivity in a way that challenges the anthropocentric point of view by rejecting human exceptionalism and emphasizing the material embeddedness and interconnectivity of all beings. It is common among posthumanist thinkers to posit a flat ontological plane in which no being takes precedence over others. Rosi Braidotti coins this “zoe-egalitarianism,” a position that embraces and values all life and rejects any form of exceptionalism. As Braidotti suggests, embracing this point of view entails a far-reaching reconceptualization of the ontological plane and the beings it encompasses. She says: “the posthuman condition introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet.” (2013, 2) Braidotti speaks of “the posthuman condition” in reference to how we may conceive of ourselves beyond humanism. Braidotti’s earlier Deleuze-inspired notion of the nomadic subject morphs into that of the posthuman while retaining its main characteristics: a fluid and hybrid being with a body that is a layer of corporeality, a substratum of living matter in which a self is grounded. This entails, as Braidotti also puts it, that “we need to learn to think differently about ourselves.” (2013, 12) Understanding our being as rooted and entangled in materiality is key to that and is the first step toward embracing our beings as such, as I will argue in the latter part of this paper.

Bennett’s concept of vibrant matter is important for my view. She says “I believe it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms, ... I believe that encounters with lively matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests.” (2010, 122) Bennett’s explicit goals are ethical and political. She wishes us to be attentive to matter and its power and thinks that this renewed attentiveness “can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations.” (13) Grounding her view in Spinoza’s notion of the affective body and Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of assemblage, she speaks of an “effervescence of agency” (29) that is distributed within and across individuals in the assemblage. This leads to a displacement of the subject, a deflation of the notion of agent, and a rediscovery of what we always were: beings engaged in a dance with other beings, human and nonhuman, an “interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity.” (31) An important point she makes is that the human “individual” – or more properly, the *dividual* – is itself an assemblage that operates within congregational assemblages. Entanglement is multilayered and runs within and

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1. This resonates with Braidotti’s proposal to conceive of the enbrainment of the body and the embodiment of the mind (see Braidotti, 2018).

through the layers.

Stacy Alaimo and Nancy Tuana share this material feminist approach. Alaimo emphasizes that we are transcorporeal beings. She says, “a recognition of trans-corporeality entails a rather disconcerting sense of being immersed within incalculable, interconnected material agencies that erode even our most sophisticated modes of understanding.” (2010, 17) She suggests that “the human is always the very stuff of the messy, contingent, emergent mix of the material world.” (2010, 11) She embraces Nancy Tuana’s view of viscous porosity, a view connected to interactionism which sees the world as composed of “complex phenomena in dynamic relationality.” (2008, 191) She insists that our bodies have permeable boundaries (the skin, mucous surfaces, orifices) making us porous beings speared by the materiality surrounding us at the same time we seep into that materiality. This all means that we are toxic bodies with exceedingly leaky borders and as such, we are post-Humanist (indeed, the humanist subject is a solid, autarkic entity that does not leak or is not permeated by other beings). This points to the ontological vulnerability at the core of our beings, a vulnerability that can be problematic in a Humanist context wherein we try to deny it or guard ourselves against it. It can, however, and with the right mindset, be the tool we need to thrive.

In her latest book, Alaimo pushes the line of thinking on the transcorporeal. She talks of the “exposed subject [which] is always already penetrated by substances and forces that can never be properly accounted for” (2016, 5). As she points out, “agency must be rethought in terms of interconnected entanglements rather than as a unilateral ‘authoring’ of actions.” (156) What is needed is for us to think the human being as material, as “subject to the agencies of the compromised, entangled world;” we need to embrace “an environmental posthumanism, insisting that what we are as bodies and minds is inextricably interlinked with the circulating substances, materialities, and forces.” (158) This requires a radical change in how we conceive of ourselves, our world, and our relations to and within it. To quote Alaimo again one last time, “Thinking as the stuff of the world entails thinking in place, in places that are simultaneously *the material of the self* and the vast networks of material worlds.” (187) I put the emphasis here on “the material of the self” because the place is radically material and not merely how one subjectively relates to one’s existential situation, for example. The materiality of place permeates the being that thinks through and through, exercising its agency on this thinking “thing.”

What the views examined thus far indicate, in addition to the material entanglement of beings, is that we must abandon our Humanist understanding of agency as the willful expression of freedom by an autarkic and autonomous being. We must instead embrace a notion of distributed agency, better even: distributed agentic capacity, a concept used by Diana Coole, Samantha Frost, and many others. The concept of agentic capacity is grounded in Karen Barad’s famous *Meet the Universe Halfway* in which she speaks of the intra-active becoming of matter. To speak of agentic capacity definitely moves us away from a subject-object dichotomy where an identifiable and delimited subject can be identified as an autonomous agent. To say that all matter and material beings have agentic capacity allows for capturing the way in which we are done and undone by our material

entanglements and serves to further undermine the fantasy of human mastery and exception. As Samantha Frost puts it in her recent *Biocultural Creatures*, “there are many more agents afoot in the world than human exceptionalism has allowed.” (2016, 10) Both a forest fire or microbe have agentic capacity and sometimes the extent of their agency may far surpass that of the human. We need a new theory of the human, according to Frost, one that “does not succumb to the conceits of old [e.g. human exceptionalism] but also does not conceptually dissolve humans as identifiable agents and thereby absolve them of the crises that mark the Anthropocene.” (13) This concern, and associated attempt to establish that minimal locus of agency, is shared by many posthumanist thinkers, such as Braidotti, Alaimo, and Grosz. But where or upon what can we ground such a minimal agent? Frost proposes to conceive of ourselves as biocultural creatures. She is weary of going into the depths of the quantum field, which has been Barad’s move. The level of uncertainty, indeterminacy, and unpredictability that we find at that level is such that we might as well be dealing with yet another metaphysical plane. Instead, she chooses to look into bio-chemical operations and the atomic relations of energy that ground them.

Frost demonstrates that biological processes have intentless direction. This, she says, allows us to “account for the precision and directedness of biological activity without that activity being reducible to anything at all.” (2016, 28) Indeed, once one looks into the atomic field, one discovers the strict mechanics governing energy relations between particles. Tracking this through the atom, molecules, various types of chemical bondings, the operations of permeable membranes, and the role proteins and oxygen play is Frost’s strategy to show that these processes are distributed throughout all matter, including, of course, the matter composing us. It serves to escape the indeterminacy and unpredictability of the quantum field and it allows for the establishment of some stability thanks to the rules governing biological processes and the intentless direction it generates. Frost seeks to escape the charge of biological determinism, or the überbiological as she refers to it, in showing that our corporeal history, our temporal unfolding and the levels of stability within change we may attain, what she calls our “itness,” allow us to exercise some intentional direction amidst the intentless direction of our material foundation. As she puts it, the organism is permeated by its habitat and relies on the traffic of atoms and cells through its numerous membranes for its persistence, for life to unfold, but it also “composes and recomposes itself continuously in response to and through engagement with its habitat.” (145) In this context, to speak of an inside and an outside is completely meaningless. There is no such distinction.

This is one of the key to Frost’s propositions: no traffic through membranes, no life. No intermingling with one’s habitat, no life. These processes are material, through and through. Entanglement is demonstrated to be fundamental to life processes when one bases one’s analysis on the atom and up, focusing on biochemical reactions, like Frost does.<sup>2</sup> What interests me in this

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2. Referencing Timothy Morton’s quip about close examinations of matter (2013), she points out that this leads to another problem: once one looks at matter that closely, matter ceases to be such (Frost 2016, 32) This leads her to question what it means for a materialist like her to claim the label “materialism” if

is the unfolding, necessary and yet open, processes that her theory uncovers since they cohere with my view of transjectivity and of the human as transjective by giving it a biochemical foundation. It is transjective and not merely transobjective because Frost recognizes culture and agency as not entirely material but as grounded in it.

We are permeated by the world we are in as much as we permeate it. As mentioned earlier, the permeability of our being renders us vulnerable. This is what I want to turn to now. This ontological fact is not to be understood negatively. Understanding it and embracing it can be generative of a new type of ethical responsibility—as per Jane Bennett—one that may lead to enhanced flourishing of life in all its instances—to give it a Spinozist twist. As Susan Hekman puts it, “Addressing the exclusion of some subjects from the realm of being must become our foremost political priority. This is [Butler’s] thesis in *Frames of War*. Our politics must be oriented around broadening the norms that define human life, who counts as grievable and who doesn’t.” (2014, 182-3) But one must go beyond Butler and expand to the material and the nonhuman as well (something Hekman ultimately agrees with her notion of the mangle which has affinities with the notion of transjectivity)<sup>3</sup>. In her own critique of Butler’s analysis of precarity, Rosalyn Diprose points out that the role played by non-human elements is often disregarded and by Butler in particular. Indeed, Butler misses the material constitution of humans just as often as she gestures to its potential importance. Now, interestingly and despite this critique, Diprose still ends up focusing on a human-centered shaping of the non-human through her favouring of the phenomenological notion of dwelling. And even when she claims that “precisely because human beings are not self-contained individuals, we are open to transformation by the world in which we are embedded and vice versa.” (2013, 191), she still ends up hanging on to an emphasis on the subjective.

What is our posthuman vulnerability that is grounded in our entangled transjective being?<sup>4</sup> As Diprose points out, the Latin “vulner” means “to wound” and the usual meaning we attach to “vulnerability” is “to be susceptible to physical or emotional injury. [this understanding of vulnerability] assumes that the body is normally well-bounded and should remain so.” (2013, 188) Such an understanding of vulnerability cannot apply to the transjective being. I think we need to take vulner—ability in a different sense. The transjective being is vulner—able since it is a body that does and undoes what it interacts with. It has the ability to wound, yes, but mostly to affect. The Latin “afficere” would be more appropriate and to talk of “affect—ability” a better way to describe what actually goes on. Being entangled in that affective fabric, our being is not only on

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indeed matter is no longer substantial. This may be her motivation to cling to the materially reliable and minimally substantial, as she does.

3. Hekman says: “What we have, then, is the subject as mangle. [...] Subjects are mangles in the sense that they are constituted by distinct elements that intra-act to constitute the ‘I.’ My argument here is that defining the subject as a mangle in this sense is the best description of the ontology of the subject available in contemporary feminist theory.” (2014, 182-3)

4. In a much longer version of this paper, I explore affect theory’s understanding of entanglement as it stems from Spinoza’s dealings with affects and how it has been developed by Deleuze and Guattari and scholars who have been inspired by them such as Brian Massumi and Patricia Clough.

the giving end of “wounding” but on its receiving end as well. To wound is to affect. To quote Bennett again, “in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself” (2010, 13) but further: to be harmed is also to harm. We are not self-contained entities interacting with one another. It should also be understood that “ability” here does not point to any kind of strong willful autonomous agency. To refer back to Frost, this ability is mostly an intentless one, the effect of biochemical processes without direction. This makes us, through and through vulner—able as affect—able.

Vulnerability is something we have often, if not always, sought to guard ourselves against. However, Simone Drichel makes a good point when she says “In seeking to defend ourselves, we—perversely—come to violate ourselves, or, to put this differently, what we preserve in ‘self-preservation’ is what makes the self ‘inhuman’ rather than human.” (2013, 22) In an effort to protect ourselves and become invulnerable, we do violence to ourselves and dehumanize ourselves. It would be best to accept and embrace our vulner—ability and seek a multitude of experiences, recognize that a number of them will lay in the intensive field of affect that we may or may not recognize as emotions but that are still constitutive of our being. Claire Colebrook also thinks that to ignore the kind of being we are is very problematic. She identifies the denial of our vulnerability, or our constant attempt to protect ourselves from it, with Humanistic thought. She says, “The fact that we forget our *impotentiality*—that we treat humans as factual beings with a normality that dictates action—has reached crisis point in modernity, especially as we increasingly suspend the thought of our fragility for the sake of ongoing efficiency.” (2014, 13) In *Frames of War*, Butler says: “the ontology of the body serves as a point of departure for [...] a rethinking of responsibility [...] precisely because, in its surface and its depth, the body is a social phenomenon; it is exposed to others, vulnerable by definition.” (2009, 33) As we have seen, the posthuman transjective being presents itself as even more vulnerable than what Butler is offering here because its permeability lays at its very biochemical core: a being whose persistence depends on transit through its own being and on its own transit through other beings, a being whose thriving relies on its affecting and being affected by other beings, subjectively, socially, materially. Posthuman vulnerability is something we ought to cherish and nourish rather than try to guard ourselves against. One may say that this posthuman vulnerability tied to transjective affects is an ambiguous potentiality, one we need to understand and keep ambiguous.

Providing a theorization of the human and all being as transjective and radically materially entangled, a posthumanist view grounded in a Spinoza-Deleuze lineage that appeals to affect, moves us away from the centrality of a subject and its experiences which has been the entire focus of the Humanist tradition. It is a posthuman move, literally a post-humanism, that serves to defeat human exceptionalism as well. The focus on materiality and its radical entanglement is a further posthuman move that allows us to understand how our vulner—ability is constitutive of ourselves and other beings, it is the very foundation of life and what allows for life to persist. As such, it needs to be embraced, cherished, and fostered.

Rediscovering the posthuman being we have always been, our transjective being with its material constitution and the operation of affects within and across it offers a more comprehensive understanding of the multi-layers of relationality in which we are always entangled. It also allows to construe of vulner—ability in genuine generative terms. Alaimo calls for the performance of exposure, namely embracing our permeability, and she explains that “exposure entails the intuitive sense or the philosophical conviction that the impermeable Western human subject is no longer tenable. Performing exposure as an ethical and political act means ... to grapple with the particular entanglements of vulnerability and complicity that radiate from disasters and their terribly disjunctive connection to everyday life in the industrialized world. To occupy exposure as insurgent vulnerability is to perform material rather than abstract alliances ... The exposed subject is always already penetrated by substances and forces that can never be properly accounted for...” (2016, 5) We must actively seek what has been construed as our “undoing” in the Humanist worldview since only then will we be thriving as beings that are constantly and dynamically done and undone.

The views I have discussed all take us back to Spinoza and his understanding of affective bodies as having the potential to affect and be affected (1996). In her study of Spinoza, Hasana Sharp explains that the “politics of renaturalization” depends on an accurate ontological understanding of ourselves and our active embrace of it. As she says, “Only when we consider ourselves to be constituted by our constellations of relationships and community of affects can we hope to transform the forces that shape our actions and characters.” (2011, 8) This includes the material entanglements of which we are. As she points out, there are multiple agencies at work, including what she refers to as “impersonal politics,” that which allows for the conscious and personal processes to unfold (13). Making ourselves aware of the existence and operation of these processes is key to not only a better understanding but to an active embrace of a better ethos, a transjective ethics, one that immerses us in these processes rather than distinguish us from them. As she puts it, this requires “an affective orientation toward joy, which indicates an augmentation in one’s power or agency.” (14) It is only through such an orientation that we may take delight in our vulner—ability and thrive ethically. As Braidotti suggests, an affirmative nomadic ethics, one that conceives of the human as a radically entangled and vulnerable being, “proclaims the need to construct collectively positions of active, positive interconnections and relations that can sustain a web of mutual dependence, an ecology of multiple belongings” (2006, 250). Such an ethics is not a set of rules but rather the embrace of an ethos, the adoption of an orientation toward being, whereby one sees oneself as interconnected and one values life and its varied forms of intermingled striving. Acknowledging and nurturing our ontological vulner—ability yields ethical growth by allowing this striving to unfold for all beings. To put it in Nietzschean terms, this means affirming life in all its instances, what he coins a “sacred yes” (1969, “Of the Three Metamorphoses”).

Were we ever human in the Humanist sense of the word? Have we not been “posthuman” all along? This is a line of questioning put forward most recently by Claire Colebrook (2014), for example. The idea is to claim, in the manner of Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern*, that

we have never been human. The Humanist ideals – autonomy, human exceptionalism, the rational human, the numerous dualisms– are merely concepts that have been superimposed on our reality and we constantly fail to conform to them, somewhat like Nietzsche’s Christian who is doomed to sin because the ideal of Christian morality is unattainable. Living as Humanists, we are necessarily alienated because we fail to embrace ourselves and life as they are. The “becoming posthuman” that I gesture to, along with posthumanist material feminists, is precisely a matter of acknowledging and embracing our being as posthuman—or perhaps as ante-human, as the human that we were before Humanism laid its crushing ideals upon us—that is, it is a matter of being authentic about the entangled beings we are rather than imagine ourselves to be the humans we can never be. As Braidotti puts it, “we need to learn to think differently about ourselves.”<sup>5</sup> Understanding our being as rooted and entangled in materiality is key to that and will yield an experience of our lives in the mode of delight, one that will foster our potential to affect and be affected rather than suppress it.

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5. Ibid. 12.

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