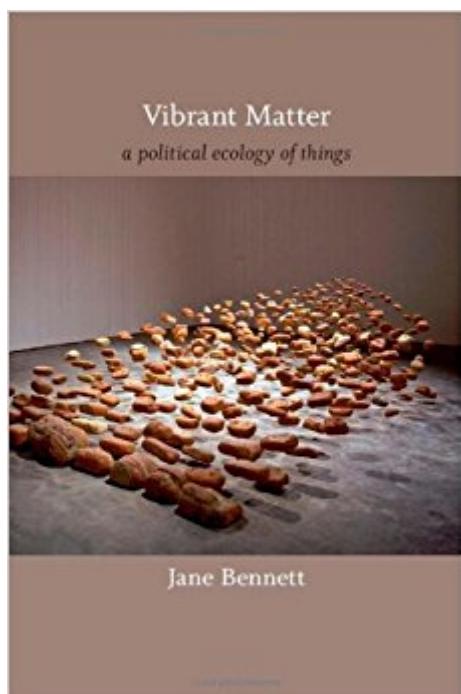


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# Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology Of Things (a John Hope Franklin Center Book)



## Synopsis

In *Vibrant Matter* the political theorist Jane Bennett, renowned for her work on nature, ethics, and affect, shifts her focus from the human experience of things to things themselves. Bennett argues that political theory needs to do a better job of recognizing the active participation of nonhuman forces in events. Toward that end, she theorizes a *œvital materiality* • that runs through and across bodies, both human and nonhuman. Bennett explores how political analyses of public events might change were we to acknowledge that agency always emerges as the effect of ad hoc configurations of human and nonhuman forces. She suggests that recognizing that agency is distributed this way, and is not solely the province of humans, might spur the cultivation of a more responsible, ecologically sound politics: a politics less devoted to blaming and condemning individuals than to discerning the web of forces affecting situations and events. Bennett examines the political and theoretical implications of vital materialism through extended discussions of commonplace things and physical phenomena including stem cells, fish oils, electricity, metal, and trash. She reflects on the vital power of material formations such as landfills, which generate lively streams of chemicals, and omega-3 fatty acids, which can transform brain chemistry and mood. Along the way, she engages with the concepts and claims of Spinoza, Nietzsche, Thoreau, Darwin, Adorno, and Deleuze, disclosing a long history of thinking about vibrant matter in Western philosophy, including attempts by Kant, Bergson, and the embryologist Hans Driesch to name the *œvital force* • inherent in material forms. Bennett concludes by sketching the contours of a *œgreen materialist* • ecophilosophy.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

â œJane Bennettâ™s *Vibrant Matter* is an important work, linking critical movements in recent continental philosophy, namely a vitalist tradition that runs from Bergson to Deleuze and even, on Bennettâ™s reading, to Bruno Latour, and (on the other hand) a â™political ecology of thingsâ™ that should speak to anyone conscious enough to be aware of the devastating changes underway in the world around us. There is good reason Bennettâ™s book has, in short order, gained a wide following in disparate areas of political theory and philosophy.â • - Peter Gratton, Philosophy in Reviewâ œFor the sake of assuaging harms already inflicted we have always cobbled together publics that deal with vibrant matters of floods, fires, earthquakes and so on. For the sake of preventing unseen future harms, Bennettâ™s book argues that we need to take a closer look at how we are embedded in a web of mutual affect that knows no bounds between living and nonliving, human and nonhuman. It is in this refreshingly naïve â™no-holds-barredâ™ approach that Bennettâ™s work has much to offer for a reconsideration of our role as thinking, speaking humans in a cosmos of vibrant matter that we continually depoliticize even in our efforts to â™protectâ™ and â™saveâ™ the earth . . . a highly recommended read.â • - Stefan Morales, M/C Reviewsâ œJane Bennettâ™s *Vibrant Matter* is an admirable book for at least three reasons. First, it is wonderfully written in a comfortable personal style, which is rare enough for academic books. Second, Bennett makes an explicit break with the timeworn dogmas of postmodernist academia. . . . The third point that makes this book admirable is Bennettâ™s professional position: Chair of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University. That someone in a Political Science department at an important university could write as candid a work of metaphysics as *Vibrant Matter* is an encouraging sign. Perhaps philosophical speculation on fundamental topics is poised for a comeback throughout the humanities. â œ - Graham Harman, *New Formations*â œ*Vibrant Matter* is a fascinating, lucid, and powerful book of political theory. By focusing on the â™thing-side of affect,â™ Jane Bennett seeks to broaden and transform our sense of care in relation to the world of humans, non-human life, and things. She calls us to consider a â™parliament of thingsâ™ in ways that provoke our democratic imaginations and interrupt our anthropocentric hubris.â • "Romand Coles, author of *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy*â œ*Vibrant Matter* represents the fruits of sustained scholarship of the highest order. As environmental, technological, and biomedical concerns force themselves onto worldly political agendas, the urgency and potency of

this analysis must surely inform any rethinking of what political theory is about in the twenty-first century. "Sarah Whatmore, coeditor of *The Stuff of Politics: Technoscience, Democracy, and Public Life* "This manifesto for a new materialism is an invigorating breath of fresh air. Jane Bennett's eloquent tribute to the vitality and volatility of things is just what we need to revive the humanities and to redraw the parameters of political thought. "Rita Felski, author of *Uses of Literature* "For the sake of assuaging harms already inflicted we have always cobbled together publics that deal with vibrant matters of floods, fires, earthquakes and so on. For the sake of preventing unseen future harms, Bennett's book argues that we need to take a closer look at how we are embedded in a web of mutual affect that knows no bounds between living and nonliving, human and nonhuman. It is in this refreshingly naïve "no-holds-barred" approach that Bennett's work has much to offer for a reconsideration of our role as thinking, speaking humans in a cosmos of vibrant matter that we continually depoliticize even in our efforts to "protect" and "save" the earth . . . a highly recommended read. " (Stefan Morales M/C Reviews) Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* is an admirable book for at least three reasons. First, it is wonderfully written in a comfortable personal style, which is rare enough for academic books. Second, Bennett makes an explicit break with the timeworn dogmas of postmodernist academia. . . . The third point that makes this book admirable is Bennett's professional position: Chair of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University. That someone in a Political Science department at an important university could write as candid a work of metaphysics as *Vibrant Matter* is an encouraging sign. Perhaps philosophical speculation on fundamental topics is poised for a comeback throughout the humanities. " (Graham Harman *New Formations*) Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* is an important work, linking critical movements in recent continental philosophy, namely a vitalist tradition that runs from Bergson to Deleuze and even, on Bennett's reading, to Bruno Latour, and (on the other hand) a "political ecology of things" that should speak to anyone conscious enough to be aware of the devastating changes underway in the world around us. There is good reason Bennett's book has, in short order, gained a wide following in disparate areas of political theory and philosophy. " (Peter Gratton *Philosophy in Review*)

"This manifesto for a new materialism is an invigorating breath of fresh air. Jane Bennett's eloquent tribute to the vitality and volatility of things is just what we need to revive the humanities and to redraw the parameters of political thought."--Rita Felski, author of "Uses of Literature "

In Jane Bennett's "Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things", she explores the role of

inanimate bodies and how humans interact with them. "Vibrant Matter" serves as Bennett's manifesto for the benefits of anthropomorphizing. Bennett writes, "I believe it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms, and that a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality, even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp. 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" (pg. 122). To this end, Bennett uses various case studies to expand her readers' understanding of what agency is and who or what is capable of possessing and using agency. Some of these agents include worms, the electrical grid, and accumulations of detritus in a storm drain. Bennett writes with the goal of shaping consciousness in order to expand humanity's understanding of its place in the world. She writes, "My hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption" (pg. ix). Bennett examines the historical debate over a mechanistic or essential arrangement of life. Describing the situating of a basic essence in each subject, Bennett writes, "While I agree that human affect is a key player, in this book the focus is on an affect that is not only not fully susceptible to rational analysis or linguistic representation but that is also not specific to humans, organisms, or even to bodies: the affect of technologies, winds, vegetables, minerals" (pg. 61). She writes of these philosophers' work, "Something always escaped quantification, prediction, and control. They named that something 'elan vital'" (pg. 63). According to Bennett, Driesch's goal "was not simply to gain a more subtle understanding of the dynamic chemical and physical properties of the organism but also to better discern what animated the machine" (pg. 71). This recalls the words Master Yoda spoke to Luke Skywalker on Dagobah, "For my ally is the Force, and a powerful ally it is. Life creates it, makes it grow. Its energy surrounds us and binds us. Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter. You must feel the Force around you; here, between you, me, the tree, the rock, everywhere, yes." In sum, Bennett's manifesto demonstrates the importance of resituating humanity's place in the world by placing humanity within the world rather than outside of it.

Such a wonderful book. Jane Bennett has changed my views on "things" in a most profound way that has affected both my scholarship and my personal attitude toward the world of materials.

I think this book--maybe more than any other--set the bar for the new work on vitalist materialism

and object oriented ontology. It is not necessarily the most integrative book you will read on vital matter. It drifts around and some of the author's commitments are only sketched out and then--later--loosely realized, or just generally affirmed. But her overall claims and direct approach kept coming back to me. I've used this book in an advanced seminar and the students took to it more quickly than I did. I think it set the tone for work that was to come. An important read--and fun to think through.

I like this book. It's not perfect or the most earthshaking book, but it's thoughtful and well composed. Really a lovely work. Recommend!

The book arises from an interesting premise, that of reformulating the claims of vitalism in a new light as a political project. But that's about as far as it gets: The human component is completely absent in the book, and eventually the project consists in learning to address the "demands" of object assemblages by developing "new methods of perception". I am sorry to say that this sounds like using things as mere sensors for the well being of humans. Ultimately I found the book to be full of flaws and unable (except on a nice chapter on metals) to affect me or the classmates that read it in an emotional or political level.

This is an exceptionally well reasoned religious tract that defines and argues for the importance and, then, the value of a worldview in which 1) all matter is accorded a kind of equivalent respect, from human beings to animals microbes plants and other living things, as well as inorganic/inanimate matter, including stone, sand, metals, down to their molecular structure and sub-atomic components. In essence she "fuses" the reductionist and its opposite holistic or emergent properties of matter 2) This respect arises from the agency that all matter and assemblages of matter possess 3) this worldview should drive a more comprehensive understanding and humble respect for the complex interrelationships between matter and its temporal/multidimensional property of existence. In the end--the last few lines of the book--she observes (concedes?) that her ontology consists of a kind of "Nicene Creed for materialists, which is quite elegant, and well worth the effort required to plough through dense arguments laced with generous helping of Spinoza, Kant, Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze, their disciples and numerous proponents of new wave environmentalism.

I bought this book to help write the theory chapter of my PhD thesis, which looks at material vs

ideational factors and their effects on agency. I wish I could get a refund. At times I did not know whether I was reading a novel, or a textbook, whether I was reading a work of fiction or non-fiction. The book refuses to get to the point, and I am still left not knowing exactly what the author is trying to get at. A terrible book in my opinion.

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