

Putting Speculation and New Materialisms in Dialogue

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Abstract

Over the past decade, numerous disciplines have taken on speculation as a method for research, a tool for thought, or a topic of study. In so doing, sociology, politics, design, geography and other disciplines have all helped to readdress the nature and potential of speculation, as a way of thinking, but also as a way to bridge the gap between theory and practice, something that often plagues philosophy. Despite the variety of perspectives in this range of disciplines, they often draw upon a common philosophical canon. This paper explores current discussions of speculation in the context of speculative philosophy, as well as work in new materialisms from Karen Barad, and Jane Bennett, to address some potential exchanges between new materialisms and speculation. The paper concludes with a brief description of a symposium held in 2018 that explored these themes across disciplines. It advocates further exchanges between speculative and new materialist approaches, as one way of figuring the place of matter in theory.

[Introduction: The Speculative Aspiration](#)

In 1867, the first issue of *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* was published. In a brief editorial called 'The Speculative', William Torrey Harris outlines his vision for the role of speculation in philosophy, and intellectual life more generally. He writes that to think speculatively is to 'think, in the highest sense' to 'transcend all *natural limits*' (1867, p. i). Harris includes in his list of natural limits things such as 'national peculiarities...distinctions in race, habits, and modes of living' (ibid.). In practice, this meant for Harris and his cohort of authors, that disciplinary boundaries could and should be disassembled, and the barrier between intellectual life and political action dissolved. Harris's particular ambitions for speculation did not fully materialise. As Stuhr points out in his review of an edited collection of the *JSP*, 'intellectuals

retreated into research universities throughout the twentieth century, [and] the philosophers of the *Bildung* movement seemed amateurish precisely because of their social and political involvement (2003, p. 239).

While the ambitions Harris laid out may not have come to fruition, the spirit of those ambitions is something we can still relate to, at a time when academic research across the disciplinary spectrum is making moves to show its wider social impact. This paper explores how the spirit of speculation as Harris conceived it might be rendered today, through more recent speculative approaches in research, and new materialisms, drawing on their common philosophical inheritances. Transcending 'natural limits' might seem like an overly abstract or even naïve idea, but I will show in the remainder of this paper how contemporary iterations of both speculation and new materialisms share something of this ambition. In particular, I am interested in the how mutual exchanges between speculative approaches and new materialisms can help in shaping frameworks for more-than-human domains. This can be rendered as the problem of moving beyond what Quentin Meillassoux has called correlationism, the idea that there is no way to render an understanding of the world 'independently of our subjective link to it' (2012, p. 72). This is something that speculation and new materialisms share, to think beyond the subjective, beyond the merely human, while avoiding both naïve empiricism and extreme rationalism.

Of particular importance here, is that speculation and new materialisms share a concern with showing how a certain conception of existence (ontology) has political and ethical resonances. I defend this idea, with some modifications, against Paul Rekret's recent critique (2016), by appealing to post-representational new materialisms such as Karen Barad's (2003). It is via this entanglement of existence, matter, politics and ethics that speculation and new materialisms both make a move that challenges correlationism by de-centering the human. How can this decentering be reconciled with the singular absolutising vision of speculative philosophy that runs through Harris's editorial? It is necessarily complicated by our own contemporary world, one which Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby call a world of 'multiple realities' (2013, p. 159), and the considerations this necessitates about futures, both human and more-than-human. New materialisms have faced

challenges to their calls for putting matter in equal standing with subjectivity, and the resulting de-centring of the human. The philosophical inheritances, shared between speculation and new materialisms – particularly Whitehead’s philosophy – can help tend to some of the problems highlighted by critiques such as Rekret’s. To establish this discussion, I summarise some of the prevailing conceptions of speculation in philosophy, including Whitehead’s.

Speculation in Theory

There are three distinct but interrelated ways one can describe speculation in philosophy, which all inform the more recent discussions of speculation in other disciplines.

Cartesian speculation is based on a kind of ‘introspection’. This form of speculation is concerned primarily with deducing the primary of human reason in securing the structure of knowledge, and as such is abstracted from the “merely empirical” entirely. Cartesian speculation has no use in experience, but is rather a process of pure thinking.

Kantian speculation adapts and expands this Cartesian introspection, and while it is still ultimately self-referential, Kant does include the caveat that speculation also accepts the necessary existence of things-in-themselves, a world beyond and independent of our experience. Vitaly, there is no contradiction in Kant’s view for conceiving of this world beyond our experience or have its own kinds of productive powers, purposes and even agency. It is simply the case that none of this can be proven within the limits of human knowledge. Speculation, or what Kant calls the speculative employment of pure reason, cannot by itself generate any knowledge. Rather, speculation is a vehicle for establishing the boundaries of what can be known. Hence, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant claims that ‘all possible speculative knowledge of reason is limited to mere objects of experience’ (Bxxvi).

Whiteheadian speculation is a further expansion of the still ultimately subjective form it takes in Kant. Speculation, more than a mode of reason, is an entire philosophical project, in which the endeavour is to ‘frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in which every element of our experience can be

interpreted (1978, p. 1). Such a system must be more than merely subjective, as it seeks the whole out of which subject and object relations are constituted. Whitehead contends that 'there is an essence to the universe that forbids relationships beyond itself', and that 'Speculative Philosophy seeks that essence' (ibid., p. 2). The key factor in Whitehead's case, however, is that while Speculative Philosophy seeks an ultimate 'coherence' between all the disparate elements of our knowledge and experience, the goal is not guaranteed at the outset. Speculation is like the 'flight of an aeroplane' through the 'thin air of imaginative generalisation' (ibid.). It ascends from the secure ground of the empirical, but also requires a large amount of abstraction, of thinking above and beyond this ground. This is what gives speculative philosophy its value for Whitehead; that it embrace both the rigour with which the plane is constructed, and the perilous thin air it must navigate.

All three of these notions of speculation refer to grand metaphysical projects beyond the scope of this paper to elucidate. However, they do highlight some of the underlying concerns that recent discussions of speculation inherit.

Whitehead's aerial metaphors speak to how speculation must embrace an uncertain path, must strive for new knowledge without guarantees, and that, rather than requiring discipline from some other faculty of thought, to contain this uncertainty, speculation must itself be the vehicle both of flight and discovery. Speculation must be the expansion and limit of knowledge.

The Call for Speculation as Practice

The recent collection *Speculative Research* (Wilkie et al., 2017) is an exemplary set of discussions on the conceptual and methodological issues with speculation being used in research about futures. The starting point of the collection is to rescue speculation from the negative associations with which it has historically been burdened beyond the philosophical context. Speculation is associated with prediction and forecasting, particularly in terms of risk analysis. Here, speculation is a volatile element that needs to be managed with proper predictive tools and methods. Speculation is also associated with the global financial system, as a form of investing with potentially high gains, but an attached risk of substantial losses.

While these two forms of speculation are certainly relevant when talking about futures, the kinds of speculation discussed in *Speculative Research* refer to more philosophical renderings of the term. It is these philosophical renderings that connect back to projects such as Harris's Speculative Philosophy.

Rosalyn Diprose claims that speculative thinking and speculative research show that 'speculation is ontological and political' (in Wilkie et al., 2017, p. 42). In Diprose's account, this is taken as motive for dwelling upon and exploring further the potential of speculative thinking for shaping academic practices. For Diprose, this continuity between ontology and politics derives from the Whiteheadian claim that speculative thinking is anchored to experience, that it is ultimately verified by experience. By extension, political agency is tied directly to the affective, corporeal dimensions of individual experience (ibid., p. 45). Diprose suggests that the kind of speculation rooted in Whitehead's philosophy is 'crucial to political agency, democratic pluralism, and innovation', because it opens up possibilities for experience that are futural and unpredictable (ibid., p. 41). The political implications of speculation for Diprose, then, materialize via their opposition to tendencies in conservative democratic forms of government, to try and curtail speculation by holding a monopoly on prediction. By allowing for a speculative ontology sees thinking as intimately bound up with experience of the material world, the totalizing tendency of governments (to control experience of the material world via a particular way of thinking) can be combatted.

Diprose stresses the importance of 'teaching otherness' in fostering a speculative political ontology (ibid., p. 45), what she calls 'inspiration'. Speculative thinking and its creative potentialities cannot be nurtured when kept in isolation from other perspectives, other voices, and a willingness to affect and be affected by these. The challenge here, is to keep speculative thinking balanced in this relationship between one and others, to show how it is more than merely thinking in the air, giving, as Michael Halewood warns, 'anyone the chance to think whatever she or he wants' (in Wilkie et al., 2017, p. 53). Diprose's account of speculation, as continuity between ontology and politics, operates within this challenge. In addition, her endorsement of inspiration illuminates a dynamic relationship between Harris's and Whitehead's

forms of speculation. Surely, 'teaching otherness' is a route toward thinking beyond national, racial and social differences, as Harris desires. It is a route, however, which relies not upon eliminating these differences, but by embracing their affects, via the Whiteheadian move, anchoring thinking in experience. This dynamic is also illuminated by new materialisms. I will now introduce some of the key ideas in new materialisms, before putting them in dialogue with speculation.

Matter matters!

Throughout this paper, new materialisms is written in plural, following Coole and Frost's book of the same name. For Coole and Frost, a defining feature of new materialist approaches is that they are comprised out of multiple disciplines, histories, and interpretations (2010, p. 4). Materialism, much like speculation, is not singular; it means something different depending upon which school of materialism to which one subscribes. As such, I offer a conclusive definition neither of new materialism, nor of speculation. Another important reason for this, is that both perspectives, as I interpret them, resist singular, straightforward definitions. Instead, I work through, and, as Haraway advises, stay with both speculation and new materialisms.

~~So~~Therefore, given that new materialisms resist definition, a gesture is still needed toward the ways that this paper, and new materialist thinkers, understand the term(s). For Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 'revolutionary and radical ideas [in academia] are actualized through an engagement with scholars and scholarly traditions of the canonized past' (2012, p. 13). They continue, 'contemporary generations read, or more often reread older texts, resulting in "new" readings that do not fit the dominant reception of these texts' (ibid.). Dolphijn and van der Tuin go on to call this a 'new metaphysics', by which they mean a re-assessment of old ideas, and thinking as a whole, according to perspectives not accessible to those who are the subject of this reassessment (ibid.).

While avoiding straightforward definitions, it can be said that new materialist approaches are concerned with challenging the dominance of representationalism, brought about by the impact of the linguistic turn. This linguistic turn, and its rise

through movements like post-structuralism and deconstruction, interrogate a perceived language/reality dualism, which has roots in older and more general dualisms entrenched in the European tradition since Descartes, such as mind/matter, subject/object, human/world. For a new materialist like Karen Barad, the issue here is over how these dualisms are not objective truths, but are performed, in what she calls the agential cut (2003, p. 815).

Barad's form of new materialism subverts the assumption that 'we have a direct access to cultural representations and their content that we lack toward the things represented' (ibid., p. 801). This is what Bruining (2016) calls one of the founding gestures of new materialism, a general dissatisfaction with the reliance upon language to give us the truth about a world, which is otherwise unresponsive, i.e. palpable only to human cultural concerns. For Barad, representationalism has become so entrenched in Western intellectual traditions that it is treated as common sense, as the only way of interacting with the world (ibid., p. 806). One alternative that Barad proposes is performativity. While performativity has an established history in social theory and especially feminist theory, Barad seeks to extend the performative beyond the social to the material.

Barad's work shares some concerns with other new materialist figures such as Jane Bennett, for demonstrating the need to look beyond the human as a location of meaning, value and agency. Bennett's iteration of new materialism, which she calls vital materiality, aims to show that material things 'have a positive, productive of their own' (2010, p. 1), and highlight the 'active role of *nonhuman* materials in public life' (ibid. p. 2).

Critiques, Commonalities and Concerns

Why is this relevant to speculation? Aside from Whitehead being a shared influence, speculative approaches such as Diprose's also seek to challenge the same dualisms with which Barad takes issue. Similar to Barad, Diprose associates subject/object and mind/body distinctions with forms of regulatory power that dampen creative thinking (2017, p. 45). The implication here is that attending more sincerely to materiality challenges 'instrumental thinking' and overly abstract notions of agency,

in favour of more heterogeneous and diverse intellectual practices. Is it this kind of implication with which Rekret critiques new materialisms, Rekret claiming that they commit the mistake of 'collapsing ontology and ethics' (2016, p. 226). Rekret argues that the resulting weakness of new materialist thought is a 'deployment of ethics as a means of asserting the ontological primacy of matter' (ibid.). Rekret's main point of contention is his claim that new materialist perspectives assert 'a continuity between ontology and ethics' (ibid. p. 227). This seems very close to Diprose's assertion that 'speculation is both ontological and political' (2017, p. 42). There is a sense in both these claims that a particular ontological framework yields either a politics or an ethics. For the remainder of this paper I will dwell upon these two claims and how they relate to each other.

New materialisms have faced challenges to their call for incorporating matter into meaning. Paul Rekret poses one such challenge, by critiquing what he characterizes as the collapsed distinction between ontology and ethics is more complex, namely, that a certain view of matter yields ethical demands with respect to that matter. Central to Rekret's critique is his claim that new materialisms, Bennett's among them, is that they rely on a binary choice between either 'attunement to or resentment to materiality' (2016, p. 227). This is perhaps where the aspiration for entangling matter and ethics causes problems. But they are not insoluble problems. It need not be the case that caring for the ethical charge of a particular ontology requires a binary choice between either caring about matter or not. Rather, new materialisms, in dialogue with speculation can be employed as a call to move toward, dwell upon, consider, the ethical dimensions that emerge from considering matter as playing a part in intellectual endeavours.

This call can be rendered as a 'struggle', as Whatmore calls it, for ethics to 'smuggle some semblance of the messy heterogeneity of being-in-the-world' (2002) back into accounts of that world. To put it simply, if ethical descriptions strive to matter, they ought to incorporate some of that matter into their descriptions. Similarly, is speculation hopes to confront the messiness of multiple futures, then seeing speculation as a material practice may aid in such a pursuit.

A mutually informative dialogue between speculation and new materialisms is useful because in each of their guiding assumptions is contained a search for what is on the other side. In other words, the practice of speculation can be new materialist, and the theory of new materialism can be speculative. It is possible to reclaim new materialisms from the charge that they reduce to either a binary choice between attunement or resentment to materiality, by reformulating this binary as dynamic.

Rekret's critique constructs the claims of new materialisms according to the same representationalist scheme that both Barad and Bennett challenge. Attending to the role of matter in public life, a la Bennett, or conceiving an ontology that is always-already bound up with ethical resonances, a la Barad, does not necessitate closing off New Materialisms wholly from other modes of discourse. One can see Barad's onto-ethico-epistemology as a call to action without seeing it as a non-negotiable statement of fact. The anti-representationalist tendencies in new materialisms may seem like a get-out clause, but when reconstructed in the context of the spirit of speculation with which I began, viable ways emerge of both attuning to matter and engaging with speculative thinking. A series of methods proposed by John Law (2003), help illuminate the common concerns of speculation and new materialisms:

Unpredictability, becoming, mess, spontaneity, in-articulability, responsibility

Staying with Speculation Symposium

Speculation has become a buzzword of sorts in academia over the past few years. Because of this, and due to my numerous encounters with authors who posit speculation as some positivist, miracle tool for messy issues – smart cities, the Anthropocene, post-truth politics, urban futures – I was moved to dwell on speculation, as tool, as method, as subject, as troublesome. The resulting symposium *Staying with Speculation* (Halton Mill, Lancashire, June 2018) generated some interesting responses to the issue of speculation, and how it relates to futures.

It was these kinds of themes that informed *Staying with Speculation* symposium. The content of the symposium was largely exploratory, sharing encounters and conceptions of speculation through co-creative activities ~~(see figure one)~~.

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If an ethics is not straightforwardly necessitated out of a particular ontology, as Rekret criticises new materialisms for assuming, then what is the significance of attending to the matter of materiality, and in what ways is this a speculative enterprise? Some questions that this work has raised, and which warrant further investigation:

- Can or should there be links forged between certain ways of thinking (speculation), certain attitudes towards matter and materiality (new materialisms) and political agendas?
- If so, how should these links be negotiated?
- In what ways can speculation be construed as a material practice, or, practice of mattering?

New materialisms can help to realise and make real the material, more-than-human worlds with which speculation implicitly deals, to forge a two way street between thinking and matter. If such a process is a political one, it is because attending to the practices of speculation and their matters, requires attending to our entanglements with material worlds, both human and more-than-human. It requires attending to our responsibilities and response-abilities, the abilities we have to respond to matter and the abilities matter has to respond to us.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that they have no conflicts.

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~~Figure One: Maps make districts make abstracts~~

~~This figure shows the results of a mapping exercise in which themes and objects associated with researcher's speculative approaches are placed in concordant and discordant relations.~~