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Teresa Brennan, William James, and the Energetic Demands of Ethics

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ABSTRACT: This article engages the late feminist philosopher Teresa Brennan in conversation with William James on “energetics” and “living attention.” Brennan should be prominent in what has been called the “affective turn”; yet, due to her untimely death, she remains peripheral. Against this trend, Shannon Sullivan (2015) recently appealed to Brennan’s *Transmission of Affect* (2004) to supplement James on emotion, recalibrating his sense of energetic relationality at times obscured by Victorian individualistic tropes. I extend Sullivan’s claim to consider how Brennan builds upon a Jamesian discourse of “energy” to describe the concrete possibilities of—and structural obstacles to—solidarity, with concern for the circulation of affects that energize some and drain others. While Brennan rarely references James, her papers in Brown’s Feminist Theory Archive show that she read him actively in her last years, planning to write her next book on “consciousness.” It is less surprising, then, that Brennan’s theories would resonate with Jamesian ideas, and I develop this resonance in Brennan’s published work.

KEYWORDS: Teresa Brennan, William James, feminist pragmatism, attention, ethics

Teresa Brennan was born in 1952 in Australia and died in South Florida, following a hit-and-run car accident in December 2002. In the ten years between her doctorate and her death, Brennan published five monographs,

the most famous posthumously. *The Transmission of Affect* (2004) begins with a question that readers often remember: “Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and ‘felt the atmosphere’?” Here and throughout her work, Brennan challenges the self-contained subject of Western modernity, whose affects are presumed to be possessions of that self, underscoring the historical emergence of this egoic construction.

I never met Teresa Brennan; I did not know her name until a decade after she died, reading *The Transmission of Affect* in graduate school. Soon after, I was hired at Florida Atlantic University (FAU), where I worked from 2014 to 2019 and where Brennan spent her mature career from 1998 to 2002, founding a PhD for Public Intellectuals. At FAU, she envisioned a community of thinkers who would swim, write, and engage each other on the burning question of, in her favorite Lenin phrase, “what is to be done.” Had I gotten to Boca Raton too late? Would it still be possible to experience something of the energy Brennan generated here a decade ago? This is not a ghost story, but it is a story about the relational pull of energies, which exceed and traverse individual subjects, sedimented into objects and spaces. It is about the spaces of Brennan’s resonance, as an ongoing energetic demand. From her friends, and from her papers housed at Brown University, I gather her narrative remnants, generating a strange kinship for which William James offers an appropriate expression—that of an obligation, a concrete demand.

Brennan should be prominent in what has been called the “affective turn,” which has been an interdisciplinary revaluation of nonrational, embodied modes of awareness since the mid-1990s, following a perceived era of emphasis on cultural construction (Clough 2010, 206). Gilles Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza’s *Ethics* has been productive for this generation of scholars, defining “affect” as the result of increases or decreases in the body’s striving, its capacity for activity. Affect theory tends to follow this definition, even when Spinoza is not named; thus Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, the editors of *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010), claim that “affect” arises in the “in-between-ness” of capacities to act and be acted upon (1), while Patricia Clough, the editor of *The Affective Turn* (2007) writes that “affect” names “the augmentation or diminution of a body’s capacity to act, to engage, and to connect” (2). This basic definition has been applied and developed in myriad ways. For instance, Brian Massumi (2010) examines the future-oriented logic of ‘threat’ animating airport responses to powdery substances resembling anthrax—instances in which

the *feeling of fear* generates collective action. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) draws upon Silvan Tomkins and Melanie Klein to analyze paranoid and reparative “positions” of theorizing. Sara Ahmed (2004) has explored how words attach to bodies and get “stuck” through “affective economies” of hatred, disgust and fear, but also of collective joy. Taking a step back from the intricacies of these developments, I find that “affect” can generally be described today as an “energetic” force circulated between bodies, enhancing some and draining others as an effect of given relations of power.

Brennan is largely absent from the major volumes on affect theory, save for passing citations in *The Affect Theory Reader*, where she is quickly grouped with theorists of “contagion” in Megan Watkins’s piece (275, 283) and in Sara Ahmed’s “Happy Objects” (2010, 37).² Lisa Blackman (2012) describes Brennan as well cited in the affect literature, but she only lists Ahmed’s dismissal along with Anna Gibbs’s piece in the same volume, which does not, in fact, cite Brennan (84). More recently, Kyla Schuller quotes but does not name Brennan to establish her compelling theory of “impressions” and “impressibility,” referencing *The Transmission of Affect* in a footnote with the phrase, “As one of the strongest books in affect theory puts it” (2018, 6). Despite these gestures, Brennan has been at best peripheral in the “affective turn.” Yet, her work is rich with insights for what I have elsewhere described as our present “Age of Paranoia” (Guilmette 2019b)—following the title of Brennan’s unpublished 1990s manuscript. This “age” names a set of late capitalist tendencies all the more developed today than in Brennan’s time, with the rise of social media and services promising not only immediate gratification but personalization, energizing the consumer while minimizing awareness that others have been drained to produce this individualized boost.

My analysis of Brennan’s relevance builds upon recent critiques by Clare Hemmings and Clara Fischer, concerning the narrative positioning of the “new affect theorists” as doing something *new*. This novelty is often staged as a rejection of poststructuralist epistemological concerns, e.g., representation, intelligibility, and performativity. Hemmings, however, finds that this sweeps over the rich insights of this previous generation; the new affect theorists thus suggest that these older theorists must have “ignored embodiment, investment and emotion,” but Hemmings disagrees with this assessment (2005, 556). Fischer adds to Hemmings’s critique by contributing a brief but impressive genealogy of feminist and pragmatist contributions to the study of emotion, which the “new

affect theorists” also overlook (2016, 816).³ Drawing our attention to what these theorists have misinterpreted in the work of William James, Fischer locates in James a holistic view that breaks with mind–body dualisms. I believe it also helps dispense with certain aspects of the individual–environment dualism. While Fischer and others (cf. West 1989, Tarver 2015) have dealt critically with James for the individualism of his ethics, Shannon Sullivan has gone further by appealing to Brennan’s theory of affect transmission “to supplement James in this regard” (2015b, 821). Sullivan considers how the social environment generates certain affective experiences that cannot be described as individualistic, even though they are often regarded as originating from within. Sullivan’s recent work is thus among the first positive assessments of Brennan’s theory of affect transmission.

Why might Jamesian feminism, rather than the Freudian, Lacanian, or Marxist feminist discourses with which Brennan more overtly associates her work, provide this opening for a reconsideration of Brennan’s theory of affect transmission? Brennan’s direct references to James are rare, but her papers in Brown’s Feminist Theory Archive show that she read him actively in her last years, planning to write her next book on “consciousness.” It is less surprising, then, that Brennan’s theories would resonate with Jamesian ideas, and I develop this resonance in Brennan’s published work. These rare references are largely affirmative, as when Brennan writes that affect may “be the passive perception of a bodily motion (as William James surmised), but this need not mean the motion caused the affect, or the affect the motion”; rather, *both* may be responding to the affectively thick air of the social environment (2004, 77).

In my first section to follow, I extend Sullivan’s account of the Brennan–James resonance and consider how this approach can bypass a dilemma between cognitive and embodied theories of affect and emotion. It bears noting early on that, because James uses “emotion” and Brennan “affect” to refer to the same phenomena, I use these terms interchangeably here. As I detail later, their primary difference comes in the meanings of emotion and feeling, which James takes to be overlapping (there are no unfeelt emotions), whereas Brennan holds “feeling” distinct as a capacity we might more closely associate with James’s work on attention. Having established James as a sympathetic figure to Brennan, in my second and third sections, I turn to comparative analyses of their works on willful attention and on energetics respectively, drawing out the implications of these concepts for

their ethics, first within a social context, and then in regard to the natural world. For Brennan, these two are always interrelated. In the context of feminist social theory, Brennan's appeal to energetic "chemosignals" has never yet been taken seriously; yet, James and Jamesians have treated "energy" as a serious matter for some time. Could this resonance with James and, more precisely, with Jamesian feminism offer a venue for Brennan's overlooked ideas? How does this resonance discursively *legitimate* Brennan's work on physiology, energy, and the ethics of attention? I argue that a language of "energetics" refines our regard for affect as both embodied/material and irreducibly interpretive, and as both individual and environmental, in enhancing and depleting us, in our willing, and/or our looking away.

Emotion—Between the Cognitive and Noncognitive Horns

In Western approaches to the philosophy of emotion, there has been a longstanding divide between those who argue that emotion is a cognitive state of affairs and those who argue instead that emotion is a bodily response for which cognition is not a necessary condition. The former finds historical roots in Aristotle (1999), exemplified by Martha Nussbaum's claim that "emotions are appraisals or value judgments, which ascribe to things and persons outside the person's own control great importance for that person's own flourishing" (2001, 4). Virtue would then be a matter of discerning appraisals—of feeling the right responses at the right times, in relation to the right objects. As Sullivan observes, feminists have long appreciated cognitive theories of emotion as an alternative to the predominant "dumb" theory of emotions, taken as "irrational or a-rational outbursts that have nothing meaningful to say," often associated with femininity (2015a, 30; cf. Spelman 1989, 265). Attributing intentional content to the emotions, cognitive theories made emotions serious matters for ethics and politics that bear directly on the production of the physiological. Elizabeth A. Wilson for instance, challenges a lack of feminist curiosity about the biological body (2004), following theories of social construction. With attention to what "anatomy (specifically, the gut) can know," Wilson's analysis of neuropsychological research on eating disorders suggests that biological functions like hunger and satiation are not only physiological but also interpretive, as when one negotiates a trauma of bodily boundaries (2015, 49).

To reckon with the embodiment of emotions will require a reframing of our categories of cognitive and bodily; here, James's and Brennan's physiological concerns can together articulate a position between the horns of this dilemma. This may be a surprising claim given that the noncognitivist alternative position was long associated with James through his well-known claim that we do not cry because we are sad (1884); rather, bodily changes precede any reflective experience we might call "emotion." This claim has come to be associated with what is called the James–Lange theory, and prominent voices in the "affective turn" such as Brian Massumi (2002) have drawn on James to defend that emotions are first bodily and only later interpreted; yet, there is reason to question whether James ultimately endorses this view. By the 1890s, the causality between physiology and interpretation had become more ambiguous in his work, repudiating his earlier claim that we feel sadness because we cry, naming it "an example of 'slapdash brevity of language' in a restatement of his theory" (Fischer 2016, 818; cf. James 1950 [1890], 450; 1994 [1894], 206).

James argues that emotions follow upon bodily expressions, which do not precede but indeed *are* the emotions themselves (1950 [1890], 450). This later claim primarily concerns *physiology*; emotion is always bodily, but this bodily status does not make the emotions thereby less worthy of consideration. James agrees that these *sensational* processes may include any number of inward experiential facts, despite their physiological basis; but at the same time, he contends that emotions cannot be abstracted from bodily symptoms. For James, there is no eternal taxonomy of the emotions but rather an array of bodily responses we have named for various purposes. As species of responsive activity, emotions vary indefinitely by individual constitutions and by the "objects which call them forth" (454). Despite that fact that there is no "mind-stuff" of emotion (451–52), and no "feeling of innervation" preceding activity (490), emotions are irreducibly interpretive. This Jamesian position values the advantages of cognitive theories, which *take emotions seriously* as evaluations, and the advantages of embodied and biological theories, which *take the body seriously* as a site of interpretation.

As noted in my introductory section, I build upon Sullivan's appeal to Brennan in recalibrating a Jamesian theory of emotion, *improving upon* James's physiological account by taking seriously the social conditioning and "porosity" of each individual (2015b, 202). Here, Sullivan lays a productive basis for "socializing" James but also makes

an inclusive gesture to welcome Brennan into the conversation. With James, Brennan underscores that the interpretive work of emotion is inseparably physiological. Yet, they differ insofar as Brennan's point is to show how the social shapes the biological; her theory of affect transmission considers how cultural and interpersonal forces get under our skin, so to speak. While the favored Western sense of *sight* conceptually preserves the firm division of subject/object, the less "bounded" senses of touch and smell underscore for Brennan this porosity of experience. Through these complex multi-sensory interactions, one unloads one's affects onto another—e.g., "dumping"—and also takes on the affects of others, whether draining or enhancing; importantly, these everyday interactions are framed by histories of representation and power, often skirting below full consciousness, manifesting themselves in our bodies as high blood pressure, muscle tension, and other physiological responses. Proposing that we are shaped by environmental factors originating outside us, Brennan also takes interest in pheromones, which "traverse the physical space between subjects" as molecules, altering hormones, motivating one and the other as each inhales them (2004, 75). Pheromones interfere with the functionalist, self-contained terms by which hormones have been primarily interpreted (78). Importantly, this is but one example; Brennan repeatedly denies explaining away transmission with pheromones, though like James, this does not mean that the affects could be known apart from bodily symptoms.

Brennan, like James, refuses to draw any firm conceptual distinction between embodied and cognitive phenomena; rather, the two key terms of her analysis are "affect" and "feeling." "Affect" names a transpersonal energetic shift accompanying a judgment (5), such as the projection of aggression or the introjection of anxiety, whereas "feeling" pertains to what words and gestures I have selected to interpret a circulating "affect" from the vantage point of my body—how my sensations have found their match in words (19). Brennan's distinction does not resemble the relation of "emotion" and "feeling" in James's writings; indeed, James *identifies* emotion and feeling as one, insofar as he considers 'emotion' to pertain to interpretations and responses (both cognitive and physiological), inextricable from the various bodily "feelings" that gave rise to them. Sullivan raises the concern that James's identification of emotion and feeling cannot address what she calls "nonconscious emotions," or those emotions we may not yet register, but which sustained efforts of attention can bring to consciousness (2016a, 43).

We can thus reframe the operative distinction in James as instead between “emotion” and “attention,” which functions in parallel to Brennan’s “affects” and “feelings.” I elaborate Brennan’s ethics of discernment alongside Jamesian attention in the following section; first, however, I further explicate Brennan’s distinction of “affect” and “feeling” in its differences from Massumi’s more well-known work on “affect” and “emotion.”

In his distinction of affect and emotion, Massumi defines affect as a *virtuality* exceeding any actuality, the continuing “world-glue” of experience (2002, 217), and emotion as a “subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal” (27). Thus, for Massumi, affect is that which emotion only partially captures in the terms of subject–object relations (61). To explain this partial capture, Massumi cites neuroscientific research on the “half-second delay” between sensation and stimulus–response, and he attributes to affect the “overfull” space of this half-second gap, arguing that our intentions form only after—when we veto, affirm, or otherwise respond to this virtuality in emotion (28–29). While Massumi importantly recognizes that affect is broader than the personal, interpretive uptake of emotion, Fischer finds his use of the half-second delay “telling” in its privileging the body as “prior, pure, and more immediate” (2016, 818; cf. Leys 2011), objecting that he (exemplary of other “new affect theorists”) prioritizes materiality over mind, implicitly returning to a mind–body dualism. Massumi claims that this concept of affect is prelinguistic and “presocial” (2002, 30), yet, his concept of emotion bears the theoretical baggage of culture, representation, and cognition. Massumi cites James in order to defend the body’s priority, but Fischer further criticizes this move for positioning affect prior to politics: “By providing an ontology of affect, but not a social theory that might explicate how affects can be manipulated, how they are culturally generated and transmitted, how they can be utilized for change, Massumi deprives affects of political salience” (2016, 820).

I find Brennan’s work effective in building from this critique. For Brennan, affect is already sociolinguistically mediated and filtered. The observation that feminized and racialized groups bear a disproportionate burden of affective draining in our Western culture is key to understanding Brennan’s transpersonal experiences of affect. Far from purity and immediacy, affect can just as well reinforce a sociopolitical order through habituated associations that entail energetic transfer. Residual affects may catch on and circulate through the sociolinguistic without anybody

comprehending the impetus; thus, Brennan says, the “history of an imaginary slight—in envy or wounded narcissism—can be built into a fantasy or psychical memory . . . [which] can be conjured in an instant together with its affective associations” (2004, 110). Here, the difference between affect and feeling becomes meaningful; affect, which arises in relation to “judgment,” and feeling, which arises in relation to “discernment,” are both *interpretive* and also physiological, but their interpretations function differently with regard to embodied experiences and the cognitive structures of belief. Brennan’s ethical model of discernment posits that we can come to refine our felt responses, to better attend to the affects that pass through us with habits of reflective and meditative analysis rooted in the comparisons of memory—i.e., comparing the present with the past (121). In the next section, I return to elaborate this difference in conversation with James’s work on “attention.”

Discernment and the Effort of Attention

Having considered James as a sympathetic figure to Brennan, I now turn to an examination of how James can offer a space of legitimacy for Brennan’s energetic ethics of discernment, specifically in regard to what Brennan throughout her work calls “living attention.” James argues in his *Principles of Psychology* that we only perceive those things in which we take interest, conceiving of attention as a willful and at times resistant faculty (1950 [1890], 402). Without attention, “the consciousness of every creature would be a gray chaotic indiscriminateness, impossible for us even to conceive” (403). James formulated this view in response to the English empiricists who insisted all mental faculties are products of individual experience alone. Yet, according to James, attention is fleeting—what we perceive as *sustained* attention is indeed a series of efforts to return to the matter at hand, fueled by a creative reservoir of insights garnered through habitual education (420, 424). While sustained attention tends to proceed according to learned habits, it also has what James calls “plasticity”: a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once (105). Habits thus may tend to be conservative social forces, reinforcing often-repeated actions with diminished conscious attention, but this does not discount the transformative capacities of our plasticity, forging new neural pathways in response to disruptions; it is only from among the stability of habit that we notice these jolts.

An ethics of “living” attention *presupposes* the habits of reflective and meditative analysis rooted in the comparisons of memory—i.e., comparing the present with the past—as well as the possibility of these jolts of recognition. Diverging from Massumi’s non-normative analysis of threat-logic (2010), Brennan posits an ethical command to refine our felt responses, better attending to the affects that pass through us (2004, 121). In this divergence, Brennan’s ethics of cultivated discernment has been criticized as mystical and as a throwback to an outdated model of self-reflection.⁴ Kelly Oliver makes the latter critique in the volume she also co-edited, *Living Attention*,⁵ arguing that Brennan’s ethics flies “in the face of discourse analysis and deconstructions of the origin/imitation and immediate/mediated binaries” by seeking to separate out an authentic self apart from the impositions of society (2007, 20). Oliver is right that Brennan’s ideas sounded strange in her academic milieu, sidestepping the suspicions of discourse analysis and deconstruction to consider the interpretive capacities of biological flesh in “living attention.” I disagree, however, that the “self-reflection” of this process perpetuates an illusion of autonomy because Brennan posits *discernment* as enabled by a secondary inner voice in a process that defies the over-confidence of self-coherence. Discernment for Brennan is a dialogue between inner voices, the ego and the “other-I,” by which the ego’s habitual reflexes can be interrupted. By contrast, she names the problem of “grandeur” as the *waning* of this nonegoic voice, which the other-I maintains in questioning the legitimacy of the ego’s judgments (2004, 105). This countervoice has long been shored up by civil codes and learned manners that interrupt the ego’s tendency to take its own judgments as inherently justified. In short, we *need* this other-I, which takes perspective “fueled by living attention” (121–22). In discernment, the ego is *not* in control of itself but faces a challenge from within, a challenge that does not originate innately but is habituated. This account, indeed unusual for the 1990s, resounds more meaningfully in dialogue with William James’s philosophical psychology of attention and his ethics of energy.

Adopting James’s terms, Brennan would say that habit follows the ego’s established pathways. While social, institutional, and environmental forces constitute our bodies and settle into tendencies, these habits can be reinforced or broken in our capacity for attention. Indeed, for James, “the whole drama of the voluntary life hinges on the amount of attention,” and this is determined only through our individual efforts (453). Brennan resonates with James’s attribution of freedom and ethics to the plastic

capacities of attention by positing an energetic faculty of attention capable of countering established paths of the ego. Attention is not a quantitative “ability” that one has or lacks but a kind of “insight” that comes and goes, a capacity to take distance from habitual modes of thinking and acting. This includes the way in which we adopt theoretical and conceptual tools from our own histories in the course of attempting an intervention upon them. For James, then, we could not quantify the effort of an ethical life. In his appreciation of diverse temperaments, the pluralist James would neither moralize focus nor condemn distractibility; as a researcher, he would not prescribe the overcoming of psychological and/or psychosomatic disorders with *effort* alone. Yet, he does sometimes rely upon a language of the “strenuous mood,” an individualistic and ableist way of talking that Brennan’s notion of discernment can reframe in a more inclusive vernacular. To be fair, Colin Koopman importantly differentiates James’s strenuous attitude from that of his former student, Theodore Roosevelt, whose militaristic, masculine metaphors figured energetic freedom as power over the opposition (2016, 46). For Koopman, this effort is distinct from raw power, figuring the self as a bundle of habits capable of reworking. Koopman’s distinction between James and Roosevelt thus preserves James’s energetic insights from the Victorian bathwater of idealized virility.

James’s discourse of effort and energy still calls for feminist revisions, as Erin Tarver has noted; for James, “social change happens largely because of the genius of individual men . . . not the social structure surrounding them” (2015, 106–7). Here, Brennan can help, insofar as she recognizes the demands of effort are not distributed equally. Our energies are not self-contained, but our efforts are nonetheless all too often individual; we may ask others to feel with us, to organize energy with us but collective effort is hard to sustain, demanding new forms of solidarity that are the impetuses for becoming a different people. With Brennan, therefore, we can broaden and deepen solidarity by recognizing our energetic connections, how our practices drain and enhance others in ways we may not realize. Brennan would deny that we overcome collective practices that drain society and the environment (e.g., globalization, climate change) through the individual efforts of “great men,” given that this “greatness” often relies upon the energetic draining of other subjects and even whole global regions. Yet she shares James’s ethical concern with the conditions of energetic exhaustion, which means they might travel with one another a bit further, as I address in the next section.

The Energetic Demands of Ethics

Elizabeth A. Povinelli builds upon Jamesian thinking about energy in order to decenter phenomena of intentional thought from their presumed lodging within human minds,⁶ rooted instead in efforts of attention toward one's environment, which she calls "geontology," studying out understandings of the boundary of Life and Nonlife (2016, 139). Through activist and ethnographic work with Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory of Australia, she observes the repeated casting of colonized people "into a pre-modern mentality" by attributing to them an inability "to differentiate the kinds of things that have agency, subjectivity, and intentionality of the sort that emerges with life" (5)—i.e., to attribute living qualities to objects and sites that late liberalism insists are nonliving. And yet, today, late liberalism finds itself at a crisis-point in the preservation of its own geontological distinctions between Life (*bios*) and Nonlife (*geos*)—for instance, in discourses on the present and coming dangers of climate change, water pollution, pipeline leaks, and unsustainable patterns of global exploitation, which often are cast exclusively in terms of human life, or "resources" (16).⁷

In the context of geontological reflection, James's dramatization of energy with human protagonists demonstrates some of the Western liberal commitments that Povinelli's text attempts to unsettle. Yet the way in which James comes to reframe "thought" is rich for this inquiry into the boundary between Life, *bios*, and Nonlife, *geos*, and the obligations these forms can demand (16). James's own experimental ontology—radical empiricism—underscores our energetic connectedness in its unexpected confluences and dependencies, similar to that which Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari would later describe appreciatively as "involution" on the "plane of immanence" (1987, 56–57, 238). Influenced by this ontology, Povinelli engages what she calls "quasi-events," such as mineral deposits, watersheds, and even banks of fog. She argues that these, too, are sites of effort in conversation with human efforts, despite the fact that they are not Here and Now events but "hereish and nowish," and that they may not register in dominant ethical and political discourses (2016, 21). These are what Povinelli's Indigenous Australian friends have taught her to interpret as "manifestations," efforts of enduring mutual attention between coexisting energetic forms. This would imply a kind of environmental affect, upon which discernment could also turn its attention. The task of human thought here is to observe alterations in "some regional

mode(s) of existence that mattered. . . . Humans had to learn how to heed such manifestations,” and “to watch and smell and listen to how one was being watched and smelled and heard” in a field of environmental physiology and interpretation (59, 123).

This insight, culled from James only with some interpretation, belongs to Brennan’s concept of energetics more immediately. In *Exhausting Modernity*, Brennan offers a sustained analysis of “energetics” to describe “the study of the energetic and affective connections between an individual, other people and the surrounding environment.” She finds we have good reason to suppose these exist, even though “the recognition of those connections has been blunted by the tendency to think in subject/object terms” in the West, since the seventeenth century (2000, 10). More in line with Povinelli than James himself, then, Brennan denies that the individual properly “contains” their energy. Instead, she outlines an “interactive economy of energy” operative at three levels, which together seek to encompass the non-subjective, nonobjective loci of physiology and interpretation that exist amid bodies in their social and natural environments. First, there is the domestic, in which maternal creativity has been minimized under patriarchy; second, there is the socioeconomic, through which capitalism has spawned both modern individualism and the commodity form; and third, there is the ecological, in which denial of our dependency on natural creativity takes the form of pollution and environmental abuses that effect not only the integrity of the land but the health of marginalized human communities. Together, these three levels point toward a theory of energetic exhaustion under late capitalism, produced via the commodification and abuse of resources, and thus binding energies in patterns of circulation that, over time, cannot be sustained.

At the turn of the millennium—but all the more after her death, with the rise of social media and smartphones—Brennan analyzed the insistence in Western late capitalism not only to eliminate waiting time but, distinctively, to *personalize* services with “profiles” and “favorites.” As I have written elsewhere of Brennan’s ongoing relevance (Guilmette 2019b), today shopping on Amazon, ordering GrubHub or “swiping right” on Tinder are presented as transparent exercises of the consumer’s will. This framing of willful activity, insisting upon the self-contained and autonomous ego, denies energetic relations with other forms of existence—people, but also the ecosystem of living and nonliving forms upon which they rely. The car presents a perfect example of this denial of energetic relations; Brennan

described the driver as passive director who instructs without the labor of activity—the full-grown version of Klein’s paranoid-schizoid infant, moving through the world while denying the violence it enacts on nature, “if we take pollution as evidence of aggression” (2000, 21, 23, cf. Klein 1975). From an ecofeminist perspective, Brennan argues we can explain the “off-repeated association” of women and nature by this “similar fantasmatic denial imposed upon each,” perceived instead as a passive resource as well as a receptacle for *dumping* of various kinds (26).

While James cannot be expected to offer terms for contemporary effects of globalization and misogyny, Povinelli’s intervention suggests that his pluralistic ethics of energy nonetheless offers more than many have realized for a materially and ecologically attuned ethics—an ethics of negotiating concrete energetic demands. In “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” James writes that morality emerges through sentient awareness of interpersonal demands; “the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand” (1977 [1891]), 621). There is no law or unifying measure for all good acts but, because we are sympathetic beings—energetically resonant, enhancing and depleting one another—we can pay attention to the demands of others, and we feel compelled to forward those with whom we perceive ourselves in relation (617–18). To discern our obligations—energetic demands—seems to be an interminable ethical task, in which “the ethical philosopher must wait on facts” (625). This, too, would seem to be a halting point in James’s thought. As John Stuhr clarifies, however, James does not position ‘goodness’ as standing in relation to the satisfaction of demand; rather, he “asserts that goodness *is* that relation . . . no more a ‘property’ of the experiencing subject than it is a ‘property’ of the experienced object; it *is* this relation, primary, irreducible, and not yet analyzed by later reflection” (1997, 155). Stuhr elaborates James’s view with his later claim that “affective facts” such as pleasure, pain, anger, and fear are not “purely inner facts” but illustrate a relational character (1977 [1912], 273). By what corrective, then, do we come to realize that our purposes and valuations are harmful or limited?

The answer, for James, is “attention”; Brennan’s ethics of discernment develops what this attention can do, and how we might cultivate it as a critical-ethical capacity. Yet, already in “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” James cites Emerson to describe “a depth in those moments that constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than all other experiences”; for instance, love can “shake one like an explosion,”

whereas another act might “awaken a remorseful compunction” (1977 [1899], 635). In this dynamism of physiological experience, what affects do we accept or resist in ourselves? Interpretively, what demands have we sensitized ourselves to perceive? And given that we cannot meet every demand that rises to our living attention, how do we determine which are worthy, i.e., which are our obligations? For Brennan and for James, these are questions we must continually pose to ourselves. There is no nonsituational model of response, but the plurality of our answers can ideally strengthen our interdependence.

Conclusion: The Objects That Call Us Forth

In my first section, I observed that James describes emotions as species of responsive bodily activity, which we name according to our purposes, varying by individual constitutions and by the “objects which call them forth” (1950 [1890], 454). This phrase resonates with his claim that ethics is the fulfillment of concrete energetic demands (1977 [1891]), and with Brennan’s valuation of living attention and energetic relations (2004). The language of energies, a legitimate inquiry in James scholarship, has been overlooked as untimely in Brennan’s work. I bring them together to create discursive space for Brennan to appear, but I also find that thinking about energies in this vein supports a theory of affect as exceeding the self-contained subject, as always both embodied and interpretive. Brennan’s energetic theory of affect means that an encounter with someone or something else can leave us physiologically altered, and furthermore that objects historically perceived as things can make ethical demands upon us through energetic expression.

I conclude with the encounter that led me to these questions. By 2017, living and working where she had lived and worked, I had known for some time where Teresa Brennan was struck by a car just before 2 A.M. in December 2002.⁸ In a torrential rainstorm, Brennan was mysteriously found a block south of the apartment she was subletting, after a neighbor heard the crash and called 9-1-1. I didn’t want to know this place, or maybe I did; living only a few miles north, I vacillated. Was it morbid to imagine the arrangement of trees and buildings, to wonder about the accuracy of one’s mental picture? Was this an expression of kinship, or was it voyeuristic curiosity? What did I expect to find there?

One clear-skied day, ambivalently, I set out to visit this block; stepping across the driveway of her former building, I heard a resounding boom. A block south, a transformer exploded into a ball of flame, once then two more times. Neighbors came out from their apartments following the noise and sudden loss of power. Shirtless men, older couples in bathrobes, mothers with young children gathered on the sidewalk to stare at this fiery pole and its blackened wires. By the time I could reach for my phone to take pictures, fire had fizzled into smoke, but the small crowd gazing tells me I could not have imagined this explosive energy, manifesting a claim to be heeded. This article came from that spark: a demand to do justice to the memory of a brilliant feminist philosopher who died so young. It is not a ghost story, but it is a story about the pull of energies, about those concrete demands that oblige our attention and shift our habits—those objects that call us forth—and can be said to transform the self.

NOTES

My gratitude extends to the Pembroke Center at Brown University, where the Feminist Theory Archive houses Brennan's unpublished papers, and to Woden Teachout and Steve Brennan, Brennan's literary executors. Many thanks also to Winfield Guilmette, Robert Leib, Priscilla Renta, John Stuhr, and my anonymous JSP reviewers for helpful comments.

1. Woden Teachout, Foreword to Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), viii.

2. As I have written elsewhere (*philoSOPHIA* 9, no. 1 [2019]), Ahmed (2010) groups Brennan with theorists of "affect contagion" who, in her view, underemphasize that affects are *misinterpreted* in transmission, often on account of differences in positioning of race, sexuality, ability, and other axes of identification (37). Yet, Brennan nowhere suggests that we arrive unformed or form uniformly; such an interpretation is difficult to maintain alongside her work on social pressure and the energetic draining of marginalized groups.

3. Here, Fischer includes Lloyd (1984) and others on the history of gendered dualisms, care ethics as a challenge to "gendered assumptions implicit within liberalism," and reflections by Lorde (1984), Nussbaum (2001), and others on emotions such as "anger" and "compassion."

4. As I have described elsewhere (*differences* 30, no. 2 [2019]), Margaret Wetherell argues that Brennan describes affect in "uncanny" ways, mystifying ordinary practices in need of pragmatic conceptualization for the social sciences (2012, 143–44).

5. The two were close interlocutors—Oliver's *The Colonization of Psychic Space* and Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect* (both 2004) were at one point

a co-written work. While I challenge Oliver's critique and the absence of "energetics" in her interpretation, I also appreciate that she co-edited this volume to keep the vibrancy of her friend's ideas alive, inviting ongoing debate with Brennan. Thus, I respond in the spirit of feminist friendship, while also pushing Brennan's interpretation in what I take to be a more productive direction.

6. Povinelli cites Franzese's (2008) work on James's concern with energies in the late nineteenth century, with a popularized discourse of social thermodynamics—similar to "Social Darwinism"—that functioned in a mythopoetic register of disorder and cultural decay (157). Theories of entropy troubled James just as determinism concerned him in earlier years; his "ethics of energy" can therefore be understood as opposing exhaustion and inquiring into the energetic conditions that would preserve our human civilization (178).

7. Povinelli (2016) clarifies that "geontopower" is not a new form of power but one long subtending what Foucault named "biopower," the modern management of populations (4). In parallel to Mbembe's (2003) critical account of "necropolitics" in colonial Africa, which would manifest only later in 1930s Europe, she writes, "so geontopower has long operated in settler late liberalism and been insinuated in the ordinary operations of its governance of difference and markets" (5). In relation to these developments of late liberalism, Povinelli is engaged in a "requiem," observing that "human carbon-based expansion" is overrunning other forms of existence through late liberal capital as an apparently unstoppable force, but refusing to resign to this force—developing artist-activist tactics of resistance (2016, 28).

8. I knew this because in 2016 I read Fiona Harari's *A Tragedy in Two Acts: Marcus Einfeld and Teresa Brennan* (2011). Harari's book is an exposé of Brennan's life alongside that of a fallen Australian human rights lawyer, a man who scandalously went to prison after lying that Brennan was driving his car when he got a ticket in 2006. The violence of Harari's text is to misinterpret the theme of Brennan's unpublished work *The Age of Paranoia* as a cipher for her life rather than a sociohistorical diagnosis. I avoided the book until I learned that, other than myself, only Harari had been through Brennan's papers at Brown. This is how I came to know the block, so close to my home for five years.

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