**What’s the Relevace of Isabelle Stengers’ Philosophy to ANT?**

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**Stengers and ANT: Dramatising a Divergent Alliance**

It is a difficult situation, that which the question posed to me by the editors of this *Companion* puts me in, of pondering on the relevance of the philosophy of Isabelle Stengers to this other style of work, however we may wish to define it, that has become condensed under the name of Actor-Network Theory (ANT). This is because the question of relevance is always specific, belonging to an event of a coming to matter, and does not lend itself to wholesale judgements or categorical pronouncements. Without some careful consideration, then, the question might incite quick, uninspired reactions that betray one’s own trajectories and predilections– either the relevance of her philosophy to ANT is a matter of course, and what follows needs not be written; or it is the product of a profound misunderstanding, and what follows requires the effort of a restorative critique.

Such reactions are nothing, however, if not the prolongation of what this eventful relationship, that which I insist – despite the relentless dishonouring of this word by capitalist knowledge economies – on calling *relevance* (Savransky, 2016), demands we refuse. The prolongation, that is, of the questionable Western philosophical tradition that will only set up infernal alternatives between what are divergent yet occasionally resonant paths. A tradition that will only admit distinctions between “for” and “against”, either/or, and will understand the battles and conflicts as symptoms of a more transcendent reason to be unveiled, one finally capable of realising the modern dream of an ecumenical, perpetual peace– ecumenical, that is, except for those that will be subsequently cast as irrational.

Believing with William James (1956) that rationality is more of a sentiment than a faculty, this is a tradition I seek to refuse. As I see it, what is at stake instead is to explore some of the divergent connections *through* which these two projects have woven a certain intellectual kinship. Indeed, because insights from ANT and Stengers’ philosophy, respectively, have been gaining reception in the Anglophone world at a somewhat uneven pace, scholars noting or drawing on the work of Stengers in relation to the former have so far tended to emphasise the resemblances and affinities that connect both oeuvres: some shared philosophical influences (Watson, 2014), some resonant materialist and empiricist attitudes (Nimmo, 2011), the shared distaste for critical operations (Jensen, 2014), and some connected terminology (Blok & Farías, 2016).

One cannot deny that partial connections do exist, that attention to them may be productive whenever –as with the sources cited above– what is at stake is not a mere exegesis but the retooling of diverse concepts and propositions to develop new questions and problems. And they are especially pertinent when entertained in direct relation to one of ANT’s most prominent figures– namely, Bruno Latour, whose work both founds and *exceeds* ANT [[1]](#footnote-1). For Latour and Stengers have confounded the philosophical tradition which dictates that one cannot become a worthy philosopher until one has succeeded in waging war on every other worthy philosopher. Instead, they have developed a fertile friendship as well as a very public *alliance*, generating many occasions for reciprocal learnings and borrowings across and between their respective paths. And like many alliances, this one is based not on a general convergence of purposes, but on a certain affinity at the level of the problematic itself. An affinity for the need to create words that would cease prolonging that Great Divide that separates “us”, the moderns, who can distinguish facts from values, the natural from the cultural, the scientific from the political, the rational from the passionate; from all the others, who mess all those neat distinctions up.

But while stories of connection can be productive, stories of convergence are rather dangerous. For they confuse a problematic alliance with the question of relevance itself, of how their respective responses to this problematic come to matter to each other (Savransky, 2016). Which is to say that, by pacifying their differences, other stories prevent readers from discerning the equally fertile borders through which these paths may be connected through difference. The result is that when the attempt is made not to craft creative connections but to *locate* Stengers’ philosophy in relation to ANT, a curious articulation is formed: on the one hand, ANT is regarded as indebted to Stengers’ philosophy, even as being in certain respects ‘a methodological expression’ of it (Whatmore, 2003:83). On the other, the latter is classed as a branch of an ANT tree, under what has been referred to as ‘post-ANT’ (Michael, 2016: 126). The making of partial connections becomes here a blurring of borders, and any reciprocal learning is turned into a form of convergence rather than an opportunity to learn how these projects *diverge,* that is, *to understand the singularity of the respective dramas and trajectories that force each form of thought to be set in motion* (on this see Savransky, 2018).

The challenge in addressing the relevance of Stengers’ philosophy to ANT, of refusing the aspiration of a transcendent truth capable of accommodating everything and everyone, is therefore that of dramatising the fact that such an *alliance* neither requires, nor presupposes, a shared project or a general consensus. As Stengers (2015:16) wrote in acknowledgement of her alliance with Latour at the beginning of her *In Catastrophic Times,* the forging of alliances is a process that testifies to the fact ‘that agreements between sometimes diverging paths are created thanks to, and not in spite of, divergence.’ It is thus in response to the question of the *relevance* of Stengers’ philosophy to ANT that what I seek to do in what follows is not to emphasise affinities or to highlight differences, but to dramatise their *divergence.*

Of course, a dramatisation is never a neutral operation, and the attempt made here cannot be reduced to a didactic ‘compare and contrast’– instead, it is always partial and pragmatic, responding to the insistence of a possibility. What follows is no exception. I seek to dramatise a divergence not least because it is this very concept, ‘divergence’ itself, and the crucial role it plays in Stengers’ speculative proposition of an ‘ecology of practices’, that may perhaps constitute one of the elements capable of interesting ANT allies who choose to engage her philosophy. And if it is of interest, it is because it is susceptible of asking questions that ANT scholars may consider relevant, even if they are not their own questions. The divergence of an ecology of practices is liable, in other words, to enable one of ANT’s political and methodological footholds to become *situated*: the principle of generalised symmetry (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1993; Latour, 2005). As it becomes perceptible that the relationship between symmetry and asymmetry is not itself a symmetrical relationship, attending to divergences in an ecology of practices, I suggest, prompts us to experience a space of political relations irreducible either to modern asymmetries or to generalised symmetry– an inappropriable space where angels fear to tread.

**The Angels’ Demand: Situating ANT**

“For fools rush in where angels fear to tread” wrote Alexander Pope (2013: 80, §625) in his famous poem from 1711, *An Essay* *on Criticism,* reminding the nascent literary critics of the time that bad critique is much more harmful than the possible going-astray of a literary adventure. This already seems like an apt refrain for what distinguishes an alliance from the infernal alternatives of the modern tradition. For it reminds us that the angels’ fear needs to be honoured, it demands that we slow down, and proceed with care; but it does not in itself constitute a divine prohibition. In this case, moreover, ‘where angels fear to tread’ has yet another, entangled, but more circumscribed sense. This is that, as an *ally* of ANT myself, it has for a long time seemed to me that what animates the concerns of the actor-network theorist, when imagined as a conceptual persona, is intimately related to a certain figure of the angel, in the sense in which this figure has been characterised by someone who is arguably one of the most direct philosophical influences of ANT, namely, Michel Serres.

Serres’ (1995: 7) angels, heirs of Hermes –the god of communication, of circulations and translations– are messengers, quasi-objects, mediators, bearers of heterogeneous signals and hybrid information: ‘Angels are *messengers.* […] They appear and then disappear. It is said that they move through space at the speed of their own thoughts.’ As Serres' conversational character, Pia, goes on to suggest:

In the oldest traditions, angels do not necessarily take on human appearance; they may also inhabit the universe of things, whether natural or artificial […] The light that comes from the sun brings messages, which are decoded by optical or astrophysical instruments; a radio aerial emits, transmits and receives; humans do not need to intervene here. […] We exchange information with objects that appear more as relations, token, codes, and transmitters. (Serres, 1995: 52)

Making angels (or what ANT scholars might call ‘hybrids’) and their networks visible – in travelling letters, in human migrations, in scientific labs, through airports, in storms and climate patterns, in DNA ribbons, in the rain and the wind, in material designs, in the art of moving bodies, human and nonhuman – is no doubt the aim of Serres’ rather swashbuckling book. But is this not also, less romantically, the aim of actor-network theorists – might we call them *angel-network theorists?* – as travellers following ancient and novel 'angelic paths' (or, hybrid networks) that the modern tradition of the Great Divide has insisted on keeping apart? Is ANT, in some sense, not an attempt to retrace those paths that the modern tradition centrifugally expells into all kinds of hierarchies and classifications, into little circumspections and confines subsequently baptised as ‘social’, or ‘natural’, or ‘political’, or ‘technological’, or ‘scientific’, or what have you, continuously enthroning and dethroning God, yet banishing these hybrid angels at every turn?

The banishing of angels is indeed the effect of the ‘crisscrossed schema’ of the moderns wherein Latour (1993: 34), in his landmark *We Have Never Been Modern,* had located their power:

They have not made Nature; they make Society; they make Nature; they have not made Society; they have not made either, God has made everything; God has made nothing, they have made everything. There is no way we can understand the moderns if we do not see that the four guarantees serve as checks and balances for one another. The first two make possible to alternate the sources of power by moving directly from our natural force to pure political force, and vice versa. The third guarantee rules out any contamination between what belongs to Nature and what belongs to politics, even though the first two guarantees allow a rapid alternation between the two. Might the contradiction between the third, which separates, and the first two, which alternate, be too obvious? No, because the fourth constitutional guarantee establishes as arbiter an infinitely remote God who is simultaneously totally impotent and the sovereign judge.

This modern constitution, with its checks and balances, was *powerful* because it in turn located everyone – natural scientists, social scientists, philosophers, theologians, politicians, technicians – in their own little contradictory confines, on their respective trenches of the Great Divide. From there, they would appeal to their own transcendences and purified causalities, and in so doing insist on the banishing of angles and their hybrid modes of existence– neither natural nor social, neither scientific nor political, neither godly nor earthly, and yet at once real and meaningful, relational and collective, divine and mundane, human and other-than-human. But this modern operation was not almighty either– as both Serres and ANT scholars argue, angels nevertheless persisted in their proliferation. What it created, instead, was a particular kind of asymmetry, where nothing relates to anything else, unless it is *entirely* explained (away) by, and thus reduced to, something else. Start with the modern concept of Nature, and everything else becomes but particles in motion. Start with the modern concept of Society, and everything else becomes but discourse and ideology. It is in response to this particularly *modern* kind of asymmetry that ANT is born – as a counter-modern, empirical angelology concerned with the retracing of the tehcnoscientific networks through which angels arise thanks to, and in spite of, the trenches put up by modernity.

One can thus appreciate the very dear place that what they have called the *principle of generalised symmetry* holds in ANT’s development.The principle, that is, to inhabit the middle kingdom, not to deploy the categories of the moderns to explain (away) the world, ‘not to impose a priori some spurious *asymmetry* among human intentional action and a material world of causal relations.’ (Latour, 2005: 76). The metaphor of ‘generalised symmetry’ originally alluded to the attempt to correct the ultimately asymmetrical operation of the sociology of scientific knowledge (Latour 1993: 94-96), but we might in retrospect say that it was not the happiest of metaphors. Whenever it has been taken as a theoretical prescription, an ontological claim that would assert that ‘nothing is natural or cultural, everything is a relation of forces’, or worse, a global political project animated by a moral command demanding that we ‘make the world symmetrical again’, the principle of generalised symmetry has suffered the same sad fate as those modern concepts that have all too often been used as weapons: it transforms ANT into a general doctrine, capable of quashing any practice that diverges from its path. This has, of course, been an early and enduring criticism, that as Nick Lee and Steve Brown (1994: 774) have put it, ANT is ‘so liberal and so democratic that it has no Other […] it has made itself into a “final” final vocabulary.’ As they go on to expand:

Having converted the world into a play of forces, [ANT] has no way of circumventing the formulaic circle of expansion, domination, and collapse. ANT has achieved a metalinguistic formulation– inscribed as problematization, interessement, enrolment, mobilisation, and dissidence (Callon 1986)– into which any sequence of human or nonhuman actions can be encoded. This amounts to a foreclosure of all alternative descriptions of the world through the assertion of total democracy and complete ontological monadism. (Lee & Brown, 1994: 781)

One can hardly imagine a better description of what happens when a proposition, with its singular interests and constraints, is turned into a programme that abstracts and legislates at everyone else’s peril. And while this critique has been duly ‘noted’ (Law, 1999, Latour, 1999), the degree to which it has infected the habits of ANT scholars more generally remains in my view an open question. It is echoed, for instance, in Latour’s (2005: 76, n. 86) footnoted concern about the perils of taking symmetry as a *theoretical* principle, in a book that *nevertheless* presents ANT as a particular theory of associations, and thus as a peculiar approach to sociology. Namely, the concern “that readers concluded from it [the principle] that nature and society had to be ‘maintained together’ so as to study ‘symmetrically’ ‘objects’ *and ‘*subjects’, ‘non-humans’ *and* ‘humans’. But what I had in mind was not *and,* but *neither:* a joint *dissolution of both collectors.*” Central as it was, the principle of generalised symmetry appears to have fuelled considerable theoretical hubris when it was a very *specific* kind of operation that was sought, one defined primarily in negative terms, as a rejection of the particular vectors of asymmetry that characterise modernity. Alas, general principles are never especially apposite to the crafting of specific operations. In accordance to how I read Latour’s (2005) footnote, by contrast, I would thus propose to understand “symmetry” as a *technical constraint:* rejecting modern asymmetry is what the hybrid mode of existence of angels itself demands if one is to become sensitive to them, to follow their paths and networks, to translate their messages, to have them matter. Start from Nature, from Society, from Politics, from God, and you will miss them as they pass.

Understanding ANTs rejection of modern vectors of asymmetry as a technical constraint perhaps allows us, in turn, to situate the dreams of this empirical angelology otherwise. For it makes present that ANT may be best described not as a theory of the social, or of science; a theory of ‘material-semiotics’, or of performativity; and not even as an ontology of action. Indeed, we might even go as far as to suggest that, despite its best efforts, ANT may not be another way of doing ‘social science’ at all (and that may be one of its strengths)! By contrast, I would tentatively propose to characterise ANT (angel-network tracing?) as its own singular *practice,* not in the ordinrary acceptation of the term, but in the speculative sense given to this notion by Isabelle Stengers– a singular vector of divergence, of value-creation, situated by constraints imposed by the requirements and uncertainties it introduces, by the mode of existence of what makes it think, hesitate, and hope, and its corresponding obligations*.* Perhaps we can risk characterising ANT thus, as a singular practice animated by, and concerned with, the existence of a multiplicity of angels and the associations they make relevant.[[2]](#footnote-2) One that *requires* that hybrid angels not be banished by modern asymmetries, and one that is, in turn, *obligated* to follow their paths and networks wherever they may lead. Perhaps that is ANT’s own *mode of divergence–* for it is angels that make ANT practitioners think, hesitate, and hope.

To be sure, at a time when capitalism continues to expand the territory of its cemetery of practices, the invention of a new practice is no minor achievement! What is more, to characterise and celebrate ANT as a *practice* rather than as a theory, an approach, or an ontology, allows us to shift our mode of attention. Indeed, I must agree with Latour (1999) that the ’T’ ('theory') in ANT deserves a nail in the coffin (see also Jensen, this volume). Because no matter how immanent, how democratic, how empiricist, how *symmetrical* it may claim to be, a theory (not to mention an ‘ontology’) can hardly resist the temptation to legislate for everyone and everything, just as a different *approach* to the social sciences can hardly resist the temptation to compete with other approaches for who might be best equipped to define the nature of the social. But as Latour (2013) has more recently suggested, the networks with which ANT operates do not designate a general theory of being, but correspond to one mode of existence among others.

What the characterisation of ANT as a practice makes present, therefore, is that the other side of modern asymmetrical relations is not “generalised symmetry” but a manifold otherwise of possible relations to be dramatised. Indeed, as mathematicians would tell us, the relationship between symmetry and asymmetry is not itself a symmetrical relationship. And unlike a theory, which strives for the Archimedean point –indeed, the symmetrical mean– between everything it lays claims to, a practice has no such privileged foothold: from its singular situation, it must proffer its divergence into the world, among a multiplicity of other practices animated by different modes of divergence, and is thus unable to singlehandedly determine *how* it may interest others, how it may matter to them. In other words, ANT’s rejection of modern asymmetry helps us address the problem of the ways in which the moderns present themselves in a manner that disqualifies others, but as Stengers (2011: 360) herself suggests, ‘[s]ymmetry is not itself a solution to this problem’.

It is thus by appreciating ANT as a singular practicethat I propose to further explore the relevance of Stengers’ philosophy in relation to it. Not because the latter may provide the solutions to the problem that the rejection of modern asymmetry enables us to explore, but because what it may make felt among ANT practitioners is precisely the importance of *allowing themselves to be situated* by their own practice– of affirming that while the world is populated by angels it is not thoroughly *made* *of* them; that beyond angels and their paths there are other beings and connections whose differences cannot be symmetrised; that what makes ANT practitioners think, hesitate and hope, is what defines and conveys significance to *their* practice, one among others.

**Our Symmetry, and Theirs? Divergences of an Ecology of Practices**

IfIsabelle Stengers’ philosophy can be regarded as a possible ally to ANT it is doubtless because some of the problems that animate both of them enjoy a certain affinity and resonance. But Stengers is no actor-network theorist. Her experimentation with this imperative not to continue ploughing the Great Divide does not, in and of itself, *found* a new practice. It is instead concerned with the radical mutation of what that ancient practice called ‘philosophy’ might become capable of were it to refuse participation in the anonymous game of proclaiming yet another transcendental truth, yet another promise of eternal salvation (see Savransky, 2018). Which is to say that it is animated by an exploration of the question of what a philosophy *of* practices might become, when this “of” designates not simply an object of thought but an entire technique of habitation– of attending to those modes of thinking, doing and feeling *amongst which* philosophy is forced to think; *with which* it may forge alliances against their ongoing capitalist devastation; *in the presence of whom* it may risk propositions that gently shift the ways in which they may be capable of presenting themselves (Savransky, 2016).

This task must, from the outset, come to terms with a profoundly asymmetrical space, in the modern sense of the term. For indeed, one of the possibles to which it must invent a response, one of the risks it is required to take, is that of characterising the singularity of divergent practices so as to wrest the dreams, hopes and fears that animate them, from the powers to authorise and disqualify by which some practices have deservedly acquired their ‘modern’ badge. Crucially, Stengers undertook this task in response to a specific event, that is, the poisonous wrath of the Science Wars, which had physicists and social scientists respectively defending against each other the primacy of a “physical” and a “social” reality, angrily claming for themselves an “exclusive position of judgement over and against all other ‘realities’, including those of all other sciences” (Stengers 2005a: 183). And it is in response to the speculative possibility of learning to produce another mode of astonishment, another way of presenting what makes a practice diverge, that Stengers articulates her proposition of an ‘ecology of practices’: ‘How can we make it possible for a modern practitioner to present herself, justify her practice, draw attention to what interests her, without that interest coinciding with a disqualification?’ (Stengers, 2010: 49).

It might be tempting to address this question itself as a matter of orchestrating a symmetry between modern and non-modern practices. But the discussion above may have already made present that such a response will not do, for ‘[t]he “we” who symmetrizes doesn’t speak “for everyone”, using words that also apply to us and to those we will encounter.’ (Stengers 2011: 362). A profoundly political shift is at stake here. Symmetry may be a relevant requirement for some practitioners, but it is not for that reason a solution capable of becoming a general means, a tool susceptible of securing a perfect communication among practices. To extend symmetry as a general principle would amount to confronting other practices, situated by different constraints, with the need to abandon their hopes and doubts, their dreams and their fears, to leave behind what matters to them, what makes them hesitate, whether these be the detection of neutrinos, the understanding of human emotions, or the immaterial reality of ghosts. As such, symmetry itself would become the tool that thwarts other adventures in divergence. By contrast, Stengers’ ecology of practices has no recourse to such general harmonisations, and it cannot hope to represent the dreams of others in ways that would gain overall consent:

We, who are not angels but think in political terms, must therefore create obstacles that prevent us from rushing toward others while requiring that they resemble what we might become, obstacles that prepare us to wonder about their conditions, the conditions they might establish for eventual exchange. This is *our* problem. Its construction in no way ensures that the [other] will meet with us (any more than the construction of an experimental device ensures that the being we wish to mobilize will show up). Our words are relative to our practices and we now ask that they will tell us which obligations will guide us where angels fear to tread. (Stengers, 2011: 362)

In contrast to the tendency to read Stengers’ philosophy *via* ANT, the proposition of an ecology of practices should make anyone tempted to carry ‘symmetrical anthropology’ as a rallying flag hesitate. If in erecting itself as a vocabulary capacious enough to provide the “uniquely adequate description of a given situation” where every actor would be assigned a “part in the plot” (Latour 2005: 130), ANT occasionally ran the risk of allowing nothing to escape from its symmetrical webs, the proposition of an ecology of practices means nothing if it does not actively affirm an outside, always relative to its specific wager, but always inappropriable and beyond its grasp.[[3]](#footnote-3) As such, by reminding us that “our words are relative to our pratices”, the notion of an ecology of practices introduces the possibility of a political revaluation of non-symmetrical relationships.

It introduces this possible revaluation by making present that “symmetry” is relative to this *practice* called ANT– it is a constraint relevant to those who are made to think, hope and dream by the passing of angels. But their passing is not everyone’s problem, and it does not turn “symmetry” into a general mean, relevant to every practice. Beyond it, where angels fear to tread, multiple and always singular forms of divergence insist and persist, bringing a multiplicity of other practices to life. What the proposition of an ecology of practices seeks to create, thus, is not a dissolution of these borders, the achievement of a final arrangement of relations among practices that could enable them to live together happily ever after. It corresponds instead to the very challenge of approaching each practice ‘as it diverges, that is, feeling its borders, experimenting with questions which practitioners may accept as relevant, even if they’re not their own questions, rather than posing insulting questions that would lead them to mobilise and transform the border into a defence against their outside.’ (Stengers 2005: 184).

This requires a new mode of appreciation. An appreciation of practices that is concerned with the possibility of disentangling that which may function as a *force*, luring practitioners into their own risky adventures of learning, from the *power* with which modern practices may turn their own situated lessons into wide-ranging generalities, capable of judgements that thwart others’ trajectories of apprenticeship. For after all, “no unifying body of knowledge will ever demonstrate that the neutrino of physics can coexist with the multiple worlds mobilized by ethnopsychiatry”(Stengers 2011: vii). That, in fact, is the test of the speculative proposition of an ecology of practices: cultivating, on a case by case basis, the possibility of turning polemical contradictions into immanent divergences, where practices can describe their singularity, the hopes, dreams and fears that animate them, the values they create, without at the same time turning those attachments into rights, their values into claims, their dreams into theories.

And if this proposition is speculative, this is not least because it offers no guarantees, and no methodological prescriptions*–* a speculative proposition does not have the power to bring about that which it calls for (Savransky, 2017). Indeed, the proposition of an ecology of practices is not a programme that would have every practice consenting to a new way of describing what matters to it, and it excludes ‘the possibility that it might become a source of values everyone would be required to submit to, and in whose name everyone’s place and relationships could be determined.’ (Stengers 2011: 367). It involves political transformations but not in the sense that it would create representatives of practices in a new Parliament of Things, which for its part *requires* practitioners interested in the challenge of collectively reinventing the dreams and fears that shape the territory of their practices, but in no way prepares them ‘to meet someone who refuses to cooperate, to play the game, to take an interest in the challenge associated with those values’ (ibid.: 366).

The ecology of practices involves political transformations in the sense that it establishes non-symmetrical relationships. Unlike the asymmetries of the Modern Constitution, which imply hierarchisation, infernal alternatives, judgements and disqualifications, these *non-symmetrical passages* authorise nothing– they belong to an experience of metamorphosis that, in the presence of those who nevertheless remain other, enables one to feel one’s own attachments in a different way. And metamorphoses, while they may be shared, are hardly ever symmetrical, for ‘[w]e can never fully understand another’s dreams, hopes, doubts and fears, in the sense that an exact translation could be provided, but we are still transformed as they pass into our experience.’ (ibid.: 371). Indeed, the non-symmetrical metamorphoses on which an ecology of practiceswagers open a host of other political relations belonging to a world without symmetrical mean yet crossed by tangential passages, infinitely close contacts along a curve of divergence, and oblique angles of exchange involving transductions and transitions across borders. Relations that establish no new settlement, no new agreed definition of the common world, but ‘an experience of deterritorialization’, conferring on the singular manner in which a practice inhabits its situation the power to make it think. There is no achievement of symmetry here. What such deterritorialization accomplishes instead, is to make the practitioner brush against the borders of its practice– to provoke ‘an experience of “feeling” one’s own territory, and as result a practitioner, *modern or not*, may […] discover that her practice situates her, resulting in a nonequivalence that she is meant to actualize, that makes her hope, doubt, dream, and fear.’ (Stengers 2011: 372).

**Where Angels Fear to Tread: An Experience of Capture**

To suggest that an ecology of practices involves a multiplicity of non-symmetrical deterritorialisations and metamorphic political relations means that it can be neither produced at will, nor by discursive argumentation. No single vocabulary or argumentation, however capacious, will be able to bring it about: “such an argumentation is ruled by the fiction of the everybody or the anyone – ‘everybody should agree that ...’ . ‘anyone should accept this or that consequence ...’ – a fiction which downgrades to good will and enlightenment the creation of the possibility of a conjunction, ‘this and that’ where the disjunction ‘this or that’, leading to war, ruled before.” (Stengers, 2005a: 194). The possible actualisation of an ecology of practices, therefore, is never guaranteed– it may happen, but it is never deserved, and does not correspond to any right. There is thus no final answer to the question that animates Stengers’ philosophy: it postulates no ideal horizon, no set of concepts that will give theorists the power to roam the world identifying and recognising them in spite of specific and always singularly demanding situations.

As I have intimated above, between symmetry and non-symmetry lurks a marked political *option* – a divergent path that concerns the question of what the always unstable possibility of a problematic coexistence may require before it itself becomes perceptible. And it is notably around more openly political, or “cosmopolitical”, questions, that the divergences that partially connect these two paths of thought and inquiry (Stengers' and ANT's) are conspicuously expressed. While Latour (2004) would on occasion characterise “comsopolitics” as the vector and collective achievement of a new distribution of powers, the provisional construction of a new, angel-inclusive, democratic assembly oriented towards progressive composition of a good common world, in Stengers the term is deeply aligned to the experience of reciprocal reterritorialization that accompanies the ecology of practices. A profoundly non-symmetrical experience indeed, because the cosmopolitical corresponds precisely to the requirement “of imbuing political voices with the feeling that they do not master the situation they discuss”. As such, it makes resonate the ongoing problematic of a political arena that is “peopled with shadows of that which does not have a political voice, cannot have or *does not want to have one”* (Stengers 2005b: 996). Thus, cosmopolitics designates not the realisation of maximal democratic inclusion, where an entire “cosmos” may be assembled, but a generative “unknown” constituted by what a muliticplicity of divergent practices may eventually become capable of:

Cosmopolitics introduces what is neither an activity, nor a practice, but *the mode in which the problematic copresence of practices may be actualized*: the experience, always in the present, of the one into whom the other’s dreams, doubts, hopes, and fears pass. It is a form of *asymmetrical reciprocal capture* that guarantees nothing, authorises nothing, and cannot be stabilized by any constraint, but through which the two poles of the exchange undergo a transformation that cannot be appropriated by any objective definition. (Stengers 2011: 372. emphasis added)

We thus come full circle– to discover that the circle is no longer perfect. It has broken loose. Actor-Network Theory, angel-network theory, angel-network tracing. The problem has changed. Neither a matter of course, nor a mere misunderstanding, addressing the relevance of Stengers’ philosophy itself involves accepting a possible experience of capture, requiring a metamorphosis of one’s own. Unlike so many of the theories populating the contemporary academic landscape, Stengers’ concepts do not provide anyone with ready-made tools. They cannot be passed from hand to hand without transforming the habitual gestures of the hand that holds them. This is because these tools provoke thought to respond to a possible whose coming about will have the character of a pluralistic event– a response to a held out hand, by another hand stretched out from the other side, from an immanent but inappropriable beyond. For this reason, when addressing her philosophy, one should move carefully, and remember: one might find oneself there, where angels fear to tread.

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1. One of the ways by which ANT continues to recreate itself amongst its practitioners is no doubt through an ongoing interrogation about what ANT is. Relatedly, there is of course an equally open question about where it begins and where it ends vis-à-vis the work of its most prominent representatives. Because of the singular alliance between Stengers and Latour, I shall focus here exclusively on some of the latter’s direct contributions to ANT, while leaving for another occasion an examination of Latour’s (2013) most dramatic departure from it in his AIME project, where networks become one mode of existence among others. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As mentioned in the previous footnote, it is in his *Inquiry* that Latour (2013) dramatizes a movement moving beyong ANT that simultaneously situates the latter as concerned with only one mode of existence among others, with their own specific “felicity conditions”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. And in this sense, while Latour’s (2013) AIME project constitutes a stepping out of ANT that in turn situates the latter, one would be forgiven from wondering whether, in some significant respects, rather than an attempt to affirm an outside, AIME might not rather be an attempt to expand the power of our grasp. But this is a question for another exploration. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)