


# A Bonaventurian rousing of the metaphysics of primary causality to counter New Materialism

**Author:**Callum D. Scott<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Discipline of Philosophy,  
Department of Philosophy,  
Practical and Systematic  
Theology, College of Human  
Sciences, University of South  
Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Callum Scott,  
scottcd@unisa.ac.za

**Dates:**

Received: 16 Sept. 2024

Accepted: 14 Oct. 2024

Published: 17 Dec. 2024

**How to cite this article:**

Scott, C.D., 2024, 'A  
Bonaventurian rousing of the  
metaphysics of primary  
causality to counter New  
Materialism', *HTS Teologiese  
Studies/Theological Studies*  
80(1), a10235. [https://doi.  
org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.10235](https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.10235)

**Copyright:**

© 2024. The Author.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work  
is licensed under the  
Creative Commons  
Attribution License.

**Read online:**

Scan this QR  
code with your  
smart phone or  
mobile device  
to read online.

Bonaventure discerned the continuous presence of the problem of primary causality in contingent beings. From his perspective, full knowledge of the problem of primary causality emerges only when human reason is reduced to the first cause. In contrast, materialists do not consider primary causality because its empirically scientific epistemological method marginalises the idea of first cause (i.e., God). The zeitgeist of materialism and its entrenched reductionist ontology remains the core of physical and natural science in considering that all that has been is matter and holding that empiricist methods are the most reliable tools through which being can be investigated. These foundational premises are now reembraced in an in vogue ontology in the human and social sciences, New Materialism. In theology and religion, this paradigm has been applied too, despite the obvious perpendicularity in content and method of materialism when compared to metaphysical theorisations held as articles of Christian faith. Given that the human and social sciences are the natural home for expanding the conceptualisation of science, which might include faith, a case is developed that reductionist New Materialism influences against faith. Consequently, a twofold responsive model to New Materialism is made through Bonaventurianism: (1) by critiquing the absoluteness of materialist empiricism and (2) by arguing that reductionist epistemology is unreflective of multimodal being.

**Contribution:** A contribution is made to Franciscan and Bonaventurian scholarship by the reintroduction of Bonaventure's thought in the ambit of science and religion, focussing especially on ontological and epistemic questions.

**Keywords:** Bonaventure; Franciscanism; Christianity; New Materialism; materialism; religion; science; causality.

## Introduction

Materialism contributed to the New Atheists' 'scientifically'-founded conclusion that God and faith should be expunged from the human experience, placing the problem of causality aside (Dawkins 2006; Harris 2006; Hitchens [2007]2011). Later, Stephen Hawking took a different approach, as despite his materialism, he considered ultimate questions as investigable, although also theorising the irrelevance of God to a self-causing universe (Hawking & Mlodinow 2010:180). Verily, physical and natural science have been characterised by positivism's legacy of materialism because in these scientific branches' methodologies the assumption that only empirically measurable entities can be knowable holds fast (Neurath [1929]1973).

New Materialism,<sup>1</sup> a contemporary variety of materialism, proposes a return to the foundational materialistic ontological claim that all that is, is matter. It follows that if the knowable refers to the extant, then this proposition entails a boundedness of knowledge to matter. The theme of causality, a deeply explored concern in science and religion, is hence cut out of research because of its metaphysical nature. It is concerning, therefore, that many disciplines in the human and social sciences have brought New Materialism into their discourse, for only these sciences have the methodological and theoretical breadth and depth to facilitate engagement between empirical and transcendent science. In New Materialism entering theological discourse, angst should arise for religious believers, as the basic presupposition of materialism is the limitation of being and knowing to matter – premises that run counter to faith (Warman 2019:27).<sup>2</sup>

1.Rosi Braidotti coined the term 'New Materialism' (1994:154).

2.The materialism and theology debate is not considered as I focus on the impact of New Materialism on the engagement between science and religion in a critical counter. Some theologians argue that New Materialism is non-reductive. Sam Mickey contends that New Materialism, conceiving matter as active and dynamic, '... is not a mechanistic reductionism' (2020:5–6). This is inspired by a sense that matter 'matters' in a complex, entangled milieu (Keller & Rubenstein 2017:1). The New Materialist image of matter's entanglement as multilayered, is claimed not to be akin to classic materialism because of its seeking out the basic structures of matter (2017:2). Thus, New Materialism is considered non-reductive (2017:2–3). Clayton Crockett similarly claims New Materialism is 'non-reductionist' (2018:3, 7–8). However, New Materialism theorises that everything is immanent matter (Gamble et al. 2019:112). Thus, even if matter is not atomistic, the proposition that all that is, is reducible to networks of materiality, is a reduction of complexity to a primary state.

2024 in the Common Era, is the 750th year since the Italian Franciscan Friar St Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (CE 1221–1274) died, making this a fitting moment to reconstrue and develop some of his metaphysical and epistemological positions as applied to a contemporary theme; here, the engagement with New Materialism. Bonaventure is usually only mentioned in passing in the sphere of science and religion (Grant 2004:211–212; Van Huyssteen 2003:123–124, 398, 453, 894, 905).<sup>3</sup> Herein, Bonaventure's critical stance to empiricism's reliance on human reason will be exposed. It will also be argued that non-reductive knowledge of contingent being needs to be construed through plural knowledge. This research contributes to a number of scholarly areas: Bonaventurian scholarship and the philosophical and theological engagement of science and religion.

## Materialism as a preamble to reductionism and the neglect of metaphysics

The early years of the third millennium in the Common Era saw the emergence of the influential 'New Atheists' who boldly fostered the dual paradigms of empirical reductionism and metaphysical negation.<sup>4</sup> At the centre of their argument is strict materialism, deeming every dimension of everything that is, as matter, and conceivable only considering matter (2016:44). If being is equated with matter, it follows that knowledge must relate to matter and that every claim should be scrutinised according to the verifiable criteria of material claims, including of God. Because no material evidence can be found for the proposition of God, '... God almost certainly does not exist ...' (Dawkins 2006:113); thus, holding faith-based beliefs is deemed prescientific (LeDrew 2016:41).

At a similar time, exalting physical and natural science above 'dead philosophy', the theoretical physicist and prominent public intellectual Stephen Hawking ironically argues that the primordial metaphysical question should not be ignored (Hawking & Mlodinow 2010:5, 9–10). He defends plural theoretical accounts in scientific explanation (2010:7–8). Yet, like the New Atheists, Hawking is caught up in reductionism as a scientific determinist; hence, methodologically eliminating metaphysical questions (2010:34). Although recognising the need to answer the basic question of being's existence, he leaves out the fact that the argument for a self-causing, determined universe, does not address the problem of primary causality, contending that God is superfluous (2010:180).

In the New Atheists' and Hawking's arguments, a negative sentiment towards religion and philosophy is

3. Some scholars utilise Bonaventure in science and religion (cf. Gregersen 2023; Johnson 2018; Marcacci & Oleksowicz 2023), however, New Materialism is not considered.

4. The term 'New Atheism' first emerged in Gary Wolf's 2006 article (Mayer 2023). When the founders gathered on 30th September 2007 in Washington DC (Hitchens, Dawkins, Harris & Dennett 2019), they cohered a Western sentiment and received considerable media attention (LeDrew 2016:38, 50–51). Their rejection of faith and its practice, consorts with the liberal individualist malaise towards organised religion, a reactive manifestation to the sometimes dominant and misfeasant role that churches played in communities, sectarian politics, and the sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, which was rightly, exposed in the early 2000s (LeDrew 2016:40).

discerned. However, from the early part of the 2000s, the 'culture war' between science and religion – of which the New Atheists and Hawking were part – has dissipated to toleration, possibly augmented by the rich scholarship on science and religion that has been done since this time (De Cruz 2023). Nevertheless, the semblance of accommodation does not infer an absence of difference between the essential positions of science and those of religious belief.

Apparent from the examples given is the fact that an association stands between the preambles of physical and natural science and the philosophical paradigm of materialism. Both propagate that knowledge is obtained through empiricism and that material entities are empirically measurable. Indeed, the claim is supported by its proponents for the evidence-based success of empirical science lending traction to its methodological authority as a reliable source of knowledge, and science's empirical soundness, in turn, strengthens the materialist ontological limit of being (Turunen, Hirvonen & Pättiniemi 2023:26). Considering an exemplar from physical cosmology illustrates this affinity, for the theorisation that the universe is scientifically determined to spontaneously exist from empty space demonstrates the presupposed material foundation of existence. However, this purported unity between science and materialism is reductionist in that it displays a conscious ignoring of the fundamental metaphysical problem by appeal to material origins for being (Hawking 2018:29, 31, 33, 37–38; Krauss 2012:145, 151, 161). The consequence by analysis is that embedded ontology is materialised, subtly deeming articles of faith as irrelevant to human knowing.

I consider then that a contemporary problem to science and religion is not overtly vociferous antagonism as it was before but the more nuanced difficulty posed to metaphysics by the deep-seated materialism that flashes through empirical science. Furthermore, by materialism's more recent manifestation in human and social science in New Materialism, an existential challenge to the dialogue is posed as materialism becomes further entrenched in multiple locales of human understanding.<sup>5</sup>

Materialism emerged in the Atomists of the 5th century BCE, where Leucippus and Democritus can be classed among the first who conceived natural laws as determining the action of everything and ontologically deeming innumerable atoms as forming things without recourse to metaphysical causality (Diogenes Laërtius 1853:388–390, 394–395; Russell [1946]1996:72–73). Epicurus, a Greek philosopher of the 4th century BCE, also advanced atomism (Russell [1946]1996:238–239; Diogenes Laërtius 1853:439–440). Monist materialism emerged again in the 17th century CE in Baruch de Spinoza's

5. New Materialism is found in philosophy (e.g., cf. Davies 2021; Elvey 2023), theology (e.g., cf. Keller & Rubenstein 2017; Mickey 2020; Reader 2017; Crockett 2018), religious studies (e.g., cf. Waggoner & Rieger 2015), gender studies (e.g., cf. Revelles Benavente, Rogowska-Stangret & Ernst 2020; Wolfe 2022), history (e.g., cf. Schouwenberg 2015), psychology (e.g., cf. Smith & Monforte 2020), etc.

work (*The Ethics*, Part I, Proposition XIV),<sup>6</sup> and radically in the reductionist Atheism of Julien Offray de La Mettrie, an 18th century CE deterministic physicalist who thought the human to be a mechanistic, material animal ([1787]2017:20–21, 23, 33). These positions give impetus to the epistemology of positivism's progenitor, Auguste Comte's opining that 'real knowledge' pertained to the physically extant and sensorily observed alone ([1896]2000:29, 31). The positivists further removed metaphysics from science as the real is experienceable, entailing that through empiricism and analytic logic, empirical science came to be considered as the ultimate source of veritable knowledge (Neurath [1929]1973:301–302, 306, 308). Curiously, though, such reductionism cannot give sufficient proof for the position that what is real is only a sensorily experienced phenomena. The inferential problem of induction is made in materialist claims transcending the bounds of their own explanatory ability. Materialism can, thus, be critiqued as a non-materialistic leap of faith (Treanor 2022:237).

The positivist hope in empirical science's epistemic sufficiency and materiality has been held as science's motif, and it has been transposed into the human and social sciences by New Materialism, which bears a resemblance to non-dualist monism (Fox & Alldred 2018; Schouwenberg 2015:63; Tompkins 2016), and its vitalism has similarity to the thought of various indigenous philosophies and feminist and decolonial theorisations (Tompkins 2016).

Characterised broadly as posthuman, materialist and monist, New Materialism emerged in the feminist and gender studies movements' critique of Postmodernity (Barad 2007:135; Fox & Alldred 2018; Schouwenberg 2015:59–60). The critique is rooted in Postmodernity, having turned away from matter and the empirical sciences (Gamble, Hanan & Nail 2019:111), particularly in the theorisation that meaning is constructed through various social processes, for example, language (Monforte 2018:379). With its emphasis on the linguistic and constructed, Karen Barad deems Postmodernity as '... a brute reversal of naturalist beliefs', as she ponders the authority it gives language over matter (2007:132). Posthuman New Materialism, in reaction to the linguistic turn, reinserts the text interpreted, the interpreted knowing, the power to interpret and the subjective interpreter back into matter to overcome Modern and Postmodern dualism (Schouwenberg 2015:63).<sup>7</sup>

In turning from language, New Materialism ontologically centres on matter (Barad 2007:3; Fox & Alldred 2018),

6.Although a materialist, Spinoza is neither atheistic nor opposed to metaphysics, but his philosophical ontology conceived nature and God as coterminous, for instance he describes '... the eternal and infinite being ... [as] God or Nature' (*The Ethics*, Part I, Preface [the emphasis is the author's insertion]). In Spinoza's theorising, God is necessary, i.e., not contingent, and infinite, and thus all beings that have being have emerged from God (Part I, Proposition XVI). Moreover, God is not only the source of being, but all that is, is formed of the same substance, such that the only substance that is, is God: '[w]hatsoever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be, or be conceived' (part I, XV). While equating God with Nature, 'God' could be removed from Spinoza's theory without much difference than what Spinoza holds, so leaving material Nature alone, in his monism. Nevertheless, in the reduction to a singular ontology, monism, Spinoza prefigures an essential theoretical dimension of New Materialism, although his metaphysical leanings do not.

7.'Posthuman' refers to a critique of anthropocentric approaches in philosophical discourse (Ferrando 2013:29).

embracing the all-encompassing metaphysical conjecture that nothing exists beyond immanent matter (Gamble et al. 2019:112). Furthermore, in the construal of the 'stuff' of matter, New Materialism deems no material thing existing as separate from any other (Barad 2007:136). Any knowledge produced – including the study of value and ethics – must therefore centre upon matter and avoid the Modern and Postmodern trap of dualism and binary divisions (Monforte 2018:379–380).

In New Materialism's ontological positioning of matter (Barad 2007:3), matter is reconstituted away from atomic discreteness. Epistemically, therefore, meaning is developed in terms of matter imaged as a: '... phenomena in their ongoing materialization', as a vital emergence of substance related to substance (Barad 2007:150–151). Matter is non-static, dynamic, interconnected and agentive (Barad 2007:135–136; Gamble et al. 2019:111; Monforte 2018:379–380; Tompkins 2016). With matter as foundational, New Materialists consider the cosmos' existence as accounted for by an emergent ontology, entailing immanent, non-causal dependence (Fox & Alldred 2018). If the very problem of primary causality is placed aside by New Materialists' ascribing ontological agency for the emergence of matter into matter, it appears that New Materialism both ignores the fundamental metaphysical problem and misconstrues the distinction between primary and secondary causality. For although secondary causality, which I define as the change in form of matter, could be the result of the impact of another material force upon matter, the bringing into being of matter itself cannot be ascribed to non-agentive matter. To use an idea from Sacred Scripture (cf. Is 64:7) to illustrate: the potter moulds clay with teleological agency, however, a lump of clay bashed into another lump of clay cannot be conceived as acting with agency or with any teleological foresight. Still, the striking of clay into clay may result in a change of form of the clay. Moreover, while an agentive potter may work on clay to bring about a desired form in clay, the potter, although acting with agency in the secondary causal sense, cannot bring the clay-matter into being. It could be added that materialists may argue for determinism in the forces of natural processes. It is the case that evolutionary dynamics do cohere with this sentiment. However, here too, there is a conflation of the distinction between primary and secondary causality. For although such processes do exist, their being does not account for the being of those same processes. Still, in the New Materialist paradigm it is argued that if material emergentism can explain a causally non-necessary system, then transcendent, foundational metaphysics has no place within it (Fox & Alldred 2018).

The New Materialist theorisation of matter is characterised by matter's ontological primacy above any constructions of the object through social systems, such as language and other modalities of meaning-making (Tompkins 2016). With matter at the core, the human is decentred by consequence, removed from their Modern and Postmodern meaning-making privilege (Barad 2007:134). All that bears

being, including humanity, is matter and nothing more (Tompkins 2016), for ‘... all creatures’ bodies are contiguous with the human world ... [they are] enmeshed with material forces and various non-human bodies’ (Taylor 2023:154). Thus, there is no exceptional human position (Barad 2007:136; Tompkins 2016).<sup>8</sup> The discreteness of material entities removed, all is matter and all matter is emergent from matter (Fox & Alldred 2018; Taylor 2023:153; Tompkins 2016).

But this materialism is not without problems. Subsuming all being into matter and removing discreteness, implies that on a social level of analysis, New Materialism cannot deal with human differentiations, which is problematic for people experiencing discrimination, for example (Tompkins 2016). Furthermore, in New Materialism deliberately embracing the reduction of the human to matter, the rich, multidimensional human engagement with the cosmos is not recognised. Yet, New Materialism does not seem to recognise the fact that non-human animals – as far as can be told in the absence of evidence on the part of non-human animals of a corpus of literature, music, science, and philosophy – have not been able to develop anything akin to the multifaceted human–cosmos interaction. In its anti-dichotomous guise, New Materialism claims non-reductionism because ‘matter’ refers not to ‘substance’ but to ‘process’ (Gamble et al. 2019:125). But, if a contrast is made with more multifaceted theoretical constructions, an interesting ontological and epistemological critique of New Materialism arises. For despite New Materialism considering all matter as processual, it remains reductionist in its singular processual ontology that has worked to systematise more complex phenomena to a singular form, even if it views vital matter as a dynamic complex of relations. In this intellectual movement from complexity to more simplistic epistemic accounts, there is an inevitable removal of sciences that do not study matter’s processes. In addition, the epistemological problem remains, for the only experience and system of reason and knowing that can be translated into understanding, including New Materialism in its own emergence, necessarily contains the central paradigmatic perspective of the human.

The Enlightenment legacy of the reduction of being to knowing via empiricism and the more contemporary reduction of being and knowing to vitalised processes leads to difficulties for the encounter between science and faith,

<sup>8</sup>Among the anthropocentric discourses that New Materialism could reject in its monism, is Christian Ethics. For the Christian, the choice to live ethically is rooted in the example of Jesus Christ, which is made known through Sacred Scripture. The foundation is hence transcendent, so in New Materialist philosophy, such undergirdings are left as redundant. The divine foundation of ethics is not philosophically required, of course. It is in this vein that Karen Barad argues for an ethics, which transcends the bounds of the human and the foundation of ethics in transcendent metaphysics: ‘... I argue that ethics is not simply about responsible actions in relation to human experiences of the world; rather it is a question of material entanglements and how each intra-action matters in the reconfiguring of these entanglements, that is, it is a matter of the ethical call that is embodied in the very worlding of the world.’ (2007:160). Thus, Barad, redefines ethics, bringing it into the realm of non-human discourse. This is not a rejection of ethics per se. But, if ethics is always, even necessarily, conceived through the ability of the human mind, does the New Materialist anti-anthropocentric ethics not suffer the fate of its own anti-anthropocentric reconceptualisation?

chiefly in the casting away of knowledge which does not fit the reduction. The former ontology demands empiricist epistemology alone, and the latter rejects the centrality of human understanding. By marginalising metaphysics – the philosophical sub-discipline that explores the nature of reality through non-empirical theories – these materialisms support the extraction of a significant portion of the understanding of being. This includes the non-empirical, metaphysical problem of primary causality, a void that challenges religious belief, as Etienne Gilson proposes, ‘... for those who espouse a philosophy of this sort, matter is the ultimate cause ... So there is no need to posit a cause of matter’ (1993:17). This problem, following the example of Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga, I wish to take up from the sources of the Christian philosophical tradition (1984:254–256). As it is reductionism that is critiqued, the counterargument needs to soundly argue for epistemico-ontology that accounts for being in multidimensional and plural ways (Ballard 2023:2, 22). It is at this point that Bonaventure enters.

## Critiquing materialisms’ reductionist reliance on the rationality of the empirical method

For the various materialisms, belief in non-empirical non-material entities is irrational. But, for the believer, religious faith is reasonable in adding vitality and meaning to life (Treanor 2022:231). Because the human has the faculty of reason, faith will be challenged, but as a dimension of the human experience, faith is not innately contrary to reason and is also a meaning-making approach (2022:232, 235), a view that Bonaventure shares.

The Scholastic Bonaventure integrates philosophy and theology (Bonaventure *Collationes donis de Spiritus Sancti*, Collatione 4, §12; Cullen 2014:122; Gilson [1937]1999:39, 1965:81; Speer 1997:33). However, he discerns that the line of delineation between them is in relation to God, for despite philosophical reason leading to primary causality, it is in theology – illumined by faith and reason – that primary causality belongs (Bonaventure 1996:43; *Collationes de donis Spiritus Sancti*, Collatio IV, §12; Gilson 1965:83; Speer 1997:32). Plurality and unity are marks of Bonaventure, evidenced by his interpretation of the proper end of philosophy, in wisdom (Cullen 2014:122; Gilson 1965:81; Speer 1997:33), but although relying on natural reason, he typifies wisdom as divine (Bonaventure *Collationes in Hexaameron*, I, 11; Cullen 2014:134–135; Speer 1997:30). Wisdom is divine, as when a glimmer of the first cause is seen, philosophy’s natural reason reaches its explanatory limit. Primary causality is not the action of the human mind but the unfolding of the Divine’s pure potency, analogously, the Wisdom of God. Thus, Bonaventure gives special significance to metaphysics as the ‘first science’, the philosophical ambit that leads the human mind to its own edge of rationality, having experienced and wondered about contingent being to abstract beyond its own causality to

necessary being for a sensical understanding (Bonaventure *Collationes in Hexaemeron*, I, 12; Speer 1997:30).

Materialism's empirical method is rooted in metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions: (1) there is something that exists and (2) matter is knowable by the empirical method. Furthermore, three human abilities are relied on: (1) sensory observation, (2) measurement and (3) reasoning over observed matter and its interactions. The human is intrinsic to empirical science's knowing of matter. However, human perception, interpretation and theories' tentativity demonstrate the fallibility of this involvement.

Bonaventure considers the reasonable faculty, like all knowledge acquisition modalities, as sourced in God (Bonaventure *Collationes de donis Spiritus Sancti*, §§2, 4; 1996:37; Gilson [1937]1999:44; 1965:85). In conceiving of reason as aiding in understanding and through it the possibility of knowing nature in empirical science, Bonaventure draws knowing that is able to enlighten the natural world for the human, to the fore (*Collationes de donis Spiritus Sancti*, §§1–2). The other modality he identifies is faith, a further divinely bestowed clarity, providing access to a different type of knowing than natural reason can (§2). In proposing that these ways of knowing give access to different objects, Bonaventure does not reject either. But he is critical of one of the products of natural reason, namely, natural philosophy.

Natural philosophy, an illumination of the intellect that makes use of natural rationality is bound to physical and natural science as in Mediaeval Scholasticism, mathematics, physics and metaphysics were part of the sub-category 'natural philosophy' (Bonaventure 1996:41, 43; *Collationes de donis Spiritus Sancti*, Collatio IV, §§6, 9). Thus, 'philosophy' is the fruit of human understanding of 'intelligible truths', formed through reason, which puts forth 'reliable and scrutinisable ideas' (*Collationes de donis Spiritus Sancti*, Collatio IV, §§5, 8). As a category, 'philosophy' is akin to contemporary science including the multitudes of disciplines present in the Academy.

As natural reason is limited in its ability and can be erroneous, Bonaventure twice recalls that philosophical knowledge is not irreproachable (cf. *Collationes de donis Spiritus Sancti*, Collatione 4, §§3, 12), and as a result:

... Everyone is sometimes made a fool by their knowledge... They who trust in philosophical knowledge and values because of themselves and believe themselves to be flawless, have become fools, that is, when through their knowledge without further light they believe that they apprehend the Creator; as if a person wishes to see the sky through candles (§12 [author's own translation]).

Were it the case that natural reason could be relied upon by itself, it would direct the human '... to the highest substances ...' – for its teleological object in the Scholastic vision is the ground of all being, primary causality (Bonaventure 1996; Gilson 1965:94). Then, the thinker could rest at the pinnacle

of knowing being, the first cause (*Collationes de donis Spiritus Sancti*, Collatione 4, §12.). But, by relying on sometimes fallible reason – '... God, is a light inaccessible to us, as long as we are mortal and have the eyes of a bat' (§13). Our natural reason cannot grab hold of the transcendent, as humans fail to fully grasp immanent objects (Bonaventure 1996:39, 41). Human rationality as a singular reliable source of knowing extant, contingent matter is questioned, given that being requires a richer explanatory system than reason alone can provide.

While Bonaventure values natural reason, conceiving that it can direct the human towards the demonstration of God's creative being, he emphasises that it cannot apprehend the transcendent radix of God's Divinity (Bonaventure *Collationes de donis de Spiritus Sancti*, Collatione 4, §12; Gilson 1965:97–98). The reach for the illumination of faith makes this task clearer (Gilson 1965:98).

## Counterweighing materialist reduction by returning and reducing plural knowledges to the first cause

The minimum assertion of materialism relies upon the empirical method to provide evidence-based, measurable claims referring to dimensions of material reality. The New Materialist impulse echoes this reductionism to the inseparable happening of materiality (Braidotti 1994:156). New Materialists hence are committed to: (1) the ontic belief that being is matter and (2) that meaning depends on matter (Barad 2007:3, 132). New Materialism leans upon its forebearers, carrying forth the empiricism of the sort of the positivist advocate A.J. Ayer, who argued that claims to meaning are necessarily empirical ([1946]1952:115). The claim 'God exists' is empirically non-verifiable as true or false (Ayer [1946]1952), as it does not refer to any measurable matter. However, empiricism does not have the methodological authority to adjudicate whether such a claim is meaningful because the determination transcends its explanatory ability. Furthermore, the materialist – metaphysical – proposition that verifiability directs to the confirmed existence of material entities also transcends the method.

I interpret Bonaventure as offering a counter to materialism's reductionism. Although Bonaventure's argument will not satisfy materialism's proponents, it is offered as a Christian way of conceiving being and knowing as a counter to materialist reductivism, stressing metaphysics' importance at the base of theology.

Bonaventure presupposes that all things have their existence founded in the Divine (Bonaventure 1996:37, 45). He also proposes the Divine origins of the lights – the 'illuminations' – that lead humans to know and understand our experiences (1996:37, 45). These gifted 'lights' cover various areas, three being 'arts' that employ reason: mechanical (technical actions), perceptual (insight into objects perceived by the

senses) and reasonable (philosophical knowledge understood in the broadest sense), and then theological (the elevation of the human mind to '... truths which transcend reason') (1996:37, 39, 41, 43). In these 'lights', an intertwined relationality is witnessed, wherein many distinct disciplines are conceived as routes for the human '... to know and understand the realities of the created order ...' (Hayes 1996:1, 11). Their common source constitutes an 'organic connection' (1996:2):

... all these branches of knowledge are ordered ... contained in ... are perfected by ... the eternal illumination ... any illumination is traced back to God from whom it took its origin. And there the circle is completed. (Bonaventure 1996:45, 47)

Unexpectedly, Bonaventure refers to this as the reduction of 'arts' to theology, but his *reductio* must not be interpreted as 'reduction', instead 'reduction' is the 'tracing' back of all things to their first cause, to God (1996:1). In this sense, 'reduction' is not a simplification of being to knowing, but the escorting back of reasoned knowing to the highest source (Cullen 2014:137; Speer 1997:40), as natural reason suggests that contingent being is '... drenched with the presence of the divine mystery' (Hayes 1996:11). Therefore, knowing's proper content refers to the causal agency of God (1996:1, 7, 11). This return is the end of the mind's path to God (1996:9).

In this scheme of knowing's return to God, the Divine Wisdom is made apparent in the mechanical arts because the product that the artisan generates begins as an idea in the mind of the crafter (Bonaventure 1996:49). On the grander scale of cosmic existence, all things that are, are initially conceived as an idea in the Divine Mind, which includes what would be generated by the craftsman (1996:49, 51). 'Thus, in Bonaventure's view, every creature is at least a vestige of God' (Hayes 1996:25).

In sensory knowledge, Bonaventure finds a similar analogical trace of God, because observed, contingent objects stimulate the perceiving subject's mind to produce a mirror-like image of the perceived object in that mind (Bonaventure 1996:47). In the likeness generated, the mind can conceptualise the object (Bonaventure 1996). With such a mirror image of the thing, the experience of the subject will be of delight (1996:49). Delight awakens the experience of beauty (Bonaventure 1996), which Zachary Hayes proposes lets the subject know of the inexhaustible, primary source of beauty: '[s]o we move with Bonaventure, from the delight of... sense experience to an awareness of the true and final delight which the human spirit will find in God' (1996:24).

The final art, philosophical reason, reduces to the first cause, too. In rational philosophy, an innate deficiency in the human ability to know perfectly exists (Bonaventure 1996:55). Philosophical contemplation, if it aims to be complete, needs to rely upon a source extraneous to the human, Divine Wisdom, which provides more illumination of being, of which it is the cause (Bonaventure 1996). In addition, natural philosophy, in its preoccupation with causality, most

especially, demonstrates the glint of Divine Wisdom, as it shows forth foundational principles that reasonably appeal to causal agency beyond the ability of the reasoning, perceiving or conceptualising abilities of the thinking subject (1996:57).

It is, thus, to the source of knowledge that Bonaventure's comprehensive epistemology returns all human knowing to Divine Wisdom, '... hidden in all knowledge and in all nature ...' (Bonaventure 1996). Following this reduction, the human mind can behold the interlinked nature of all things in their common first cause, which is also the common *telos* of all knowledge (Speer 1997:40). In knowledge's expanse and reduction, the subject can be illuminated to the realisation that the fountainhead of being, that is, of multifaceted and complex existence on all plains, is not reducible to a singular method. The case presented, through the thought of Bonaventure, shows up the demand that being makes by its existence, to be accorded the dignity of not being reduced.

## Conclusion

Materialism, in its classic interpretation and its more contemporary iteration, New Materialism, challenges faith and the holistic positive engagement between science and religion. In a particular way, the materialist reduction of being to matter and of knowing matter to empirical verifiability have been argued to be concerns to transcendent metaphysics. Problematic for these is the materialist placing aside of primary causality, which from the vantage of faith is foundational.

To remedy the identified shortfall in New Materialism's metaphysics and epistemology, a counterargument has been presented that employs Bonaventure's philosophical theology. As a Christian response to the reduction of being to matter and the reduction of knowing to empiricism, advocates of the principles of materialism would not be amenable to the contentions made. But the purpose of this research, in the fact that it is developed from the Christian perspective, is to propose a Christian rejoinder to the determined problematic for an audience sympathetic to the traditions of Christian philosophy and theology.

The dimensions of Bonaventure's thought that have been brought to the fore in this research are: (1) the querying of the accuracy of the empirical method and (2) the positing that adequate knowledge of being cannot be achieved through reduction to empirical science.

Although Bonaventure's theology discerns beauty in the material aspect of being, he contributes to the argument that being cannot be limited to matter, as the first cause beckons for recognition in every human experience of contingent being. The Divine Presence glints through all creation, as in its act of being, contingent creation returns to its first cause.

## Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the constructive comments given to a preliminary version of this article at the World

Congress of Philosophy at La Sapienza University, Rome, Italy on 2nd August 2024. Further thanks are expressed to the insightful critiques offered by the peer-reviewers of this submission, which have enabled it to develop more robustly.

## Competing interests

The author reported that he received funding from National Research Foundation of South Africa, which may be affected by the research reported in the enclosed publication. The author has disclosed those interests fully and has implemented an approved plan for managing any potential conflicts arising from their involvement. The terms of these funding arrangements have been reviewed and approved by the affiliated university in accordance with its policy on objectivity in research.

## Author's contributions

C.D.S. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

## Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by any of the authors.

## Funding information

This work is based on the research supported in part by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (Grant Number: RA201006565740).

## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

## References

Ayer, A.J., [1946]1952, *Language, truth and logic*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, NY.

Ballard, B.S., 2023, 'The threat of anti-theism: What is at stake in the axiology of God?', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 74(2), 408–430. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqad065>

Barad, K., 2007, *Meeting the Universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.

Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, St., n.d.a, *Collationes de Donis Spiritus Sancti*, viewed 03 September 2023, from [http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1221-1274,\\_Bonaventura,\\_Collationes\\_de\\_Donis\\_Spiritus\\_Sancti,\\_LT.pdf](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1221-1274,_Bonaventura,_Collationes_de_Donis_Spiritus_Sancti,_LT.pdf).

Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, St., n.d.b, *Collationes in Hexaemeron: Reportatio B*, s.n., s.l.

Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, St., 1996, 'De reductione artium ad theologiam', in transl. Z. Hayes, *St. Bonaventure's on the reduction of the arts to Theology*, pp. 35–61, Franciscan Institute, St Bonaventure, NY.

Braidotti, R., 1994, *Nomadic subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, NY.

Comte, A., [1896]2000, *The positive philosophy of Auguste Comte*, vol. 1, transl. H. Martineau, Batoche Books, Kitchener.

Crockett, C., 2018, *Derrida after the end of writing: Political theology and new materialism*, Fordham University Press, New York, NY.

Cullen, C.M., 2014, 'Bonaventure's philosophical method', in J.M. Hammond, J.A.W. Hellman & J. Goff (eds.), *A companion to Bonaventure*, pp. 121–163, Brill, Leiden.

Davies, B., 2021, *Entanglement in the world's becoming and the doing of new materialist inquiry*, Routledge, Abingdon.

Dawkins, R., 2006, *The God delusion*, Bantam Press, London.

De Cruz, H., 2023, 'The relationship between science and Christianity: Understanding the conflict thesis in lay Christians', in Y. Nagasawa & M.S. Zarepour (eds.), *Global dialogues in the philosophy of religion: From religious experience to the afterlife*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

De La Mettrie, J.O., [1787]2017, *Man-Machine*, transl. J. Bennett, viewed 03 July 2023, from <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/lametrie1748.pdf>.

Diogenes Laërtius, 1853, *The lives and opinions of eminent philosophers*, transl. C.D. Yonge, Henry G. Bohn, London.

Elvey, A., 2023, *Reading with Earth: Contributions of the new materialism to an ecological feminist hermeneutics*, T&T Clark, New York, NY.

Ferrando, F., 2013, 'Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and new materialisms: Differences and relations', *Existenz: An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and the Arts* 8(2), 26–32.

Fox, N.J. & Alldred, P., 2018, 'New materialism', in P.A. Atkinson, S. Delamont, M.A. Hardy & M. Williams (eds.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of research methods*, Sage, London.

Gamble, C.N., Hanan, J.S. & Nail, T., 2019, 'What is new materialism?', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 24(6), 111–134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2019.1684704>

Gilson, É., [1937]1999, *The unity of philosophical experience*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, CA.

Gilson, É., 1965, *The philosophy of St. Bonaventure*, transl. I. Trethowan & F.J. Sheed, St. Anthony Guild Press, Paterson, NJ.

Gilson, É., 1993, *Christian philosophy: An introduction*, transl. A. Maurer, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto.

Grant, E., 2004, *Science and religion, 400 B.C. to A.D. 1550*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD.

Gregersen, N.H., 2023, "'The God with Clay": The idea of deep incarnation and the informational universe', *Zygon* 58(3), 683–713. <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12881>

Harris, S., 2006, *Letter to a Christian nation*, Vintage, New York, NY.

Hawking, S., 2018, *Brief answers to the Big Questions*, Bantam Books, New York, NY.

Hawking, S. & Mlodinow, L., 2010, *The grand design: New answers to the ultimate questions of life*, Bantam Press, London.

Hayes, Z. (ed.), 1996, *St. Bonaventure's on the reduction of the arts to theology*, Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure, NY.

Hitchens, C., [2007]2011, *God is not great: How religion poisons everything*, Atlantic Books, London.

Hitchens, C., Dawkins, R., Harris, S. & Dennett, D., 2019, *The four horsemen: The conversation that sparked an atheist revolution*, Random House, New York, NY.

Johnson, T.J., 2018, 'Anthropology, cosmology, and Bonaventure's theology of the word', in A. Begasse de Dhaem, E. Galli, M. Malaguti, R. Pascual & C.E. Salto Solá (eds.), *Deus summe Cognoscibilis. The Current Theological Relevance of St. Bonaventure*, pp. 353–361, Peeters, Leuven.

Keller, C. & Rubenstein, M.-J., 2017, 'Introduction: Tangled matters', in C. Keller & M.-J. Rubenstein (eds.), *Entangled worlds: Religion, science, and new materialisms*, pp. 1–18, Fordham University Press, New York, NY.

Krauss, L.M., 2012, *A universe from nothing: Why there is something rather than nothing*, Simon & Schuster, London.

LeDrew, S., 2016, *The evolution of Atheism: The politics of a modern movement*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Marcacci, F. & Oleksowicz, M., 2023, 'The world as a gift: Scientific change and intelligibility for a theology of science', *Religions* 14(5), 572. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14050572>

Mayer, P., 2023, 'Anti-intellectualism in new Atheism and the skeptical movement', *PhilArchive*, viewed 15 July 2024, from <https://philarchive.org/archive/MAYAIN-2v1>.

Mickey, S., 2020, 'New materialism and theology', *Theology* 4(4), 1–82. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004520301\\_002](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004520301_002)

Monforte, J., 2018, 'What is new in new materialism for a newcomer?', *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 10(3), 378–390. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2018.1428678>

Neurath, O., [1929]1973, 'Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung: Der Wiener Kreis', in M. Neurath & R.S. Cohen (eds.), *Empiricism and sociology. Vienna Circle Collection*, vol. 1, pp. 299–318, Springer, Dordrecht.

Plantinga, A., 1984, 'Advice to Christian philosophers', *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 1(3), 253–271. <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil19841317>

Reader, J., 2017, *Theology and new materialism: Spaces of faithful dissent*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

- Revelles Benavente, B., Rogowska Stangret, M. & Ernst, W. (eds.), 2020, *Feminist new materialisms: Activating ethico-politics through genealogies in social sciences*, MDPI, Basel.
- Russell, B., [1946]1996, *History of Western philosophy*, Routledge Classics, Oxon.
- Schouwenberg, H., 2015, 'Back to the future? History, material culture and new materialism', *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* 3(1), 59–72. <https://doi.org/10.18352/hcm.476>
- Smith, B. & Monforte, J., 2020, 'Stories, new materialism and pluralism: Understanding, practising and pushing the boundaries of narrative analysis', *Methods in Psychology* 2, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.metip.2020.100016>
- Speer, A., 1997, 'Bonaventure and the question of a medieval philosophy', *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 6(1), 25–46. <https://doi.org/10.5840/medievalpt1997612>
- Spinoza, B., 2009, *The Ethics*, transl. R.H.M. Elwes, Project Gutenberg, viewed 23 July 2024, from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3800/3800-h/3800-h.htm>.
- Taylor, C., 2023, 'New materialisms', *The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory* 31(1), 152–173. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ywctt/mbad009>
- Tompkins, K.W., 2016, 'On the limits and promise of new materialist philosophy', *Forum: Emergent Critical Analytics for Alternative Humanities* 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.25158/L5.1.8>
- Treanor, B., 2022, 'Faith', in M. Hauskeller (ed.), *Philosophical conversations on the cornerstones of life*, pp. 227–246, UCL Press, London.
- Turunen, P., Hirvonen, I. & Pättiniemi, I., 2023, 'Epistemological scientism and the scientific meta-method', *European Journal for Philosophy of Science* 13, 26. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13194-023-00526-9>
- Van Huyssteen, J.W.V. (ed.), 2003, *Encyclopedia of science and religion*, MacMillan Reference USA, New York, NY.
- Waggoner, E. & Rieger, J. (eds.), 2015, *Religious experience and new materialism: Movement matters*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Warman, C., 2019, 'Philosophy and religion: Deism, materialism, atheism', in M. Moriarty & J. Jennings (eds.), *The Cambridge history of French thought*, pp. 234–240, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Wolf, G., 2006, 'The Church of the Non-Believers', *Wired*, viewed 15 July 2024, from <https://www.wired.com/2006/11/atheism/>.
- Wolfe, M., 2022, *Affect and the marking of the schoolgirl: A new materialist perspective on gender inequality in schools*, Routledge, New York, NY.