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## Agential and Speculative Realism: Remarks on Barad's Ontology

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### Abstract

In the history of philosophy, "realism" usually refers to the view that a world exists independently of the human mind. This is not the case for the "agential realism" of Karen Barad, one of whose features is the view that entities emerge from their interactions rather than pre-existing them. This aspect of Barad's thought puts her at odds with the more traditional concept of realism found among the speculative realists. Yet Barad also rejects Descartes' old taxonomical view that there must be two different *kinds* of entity: thought and dead matter. In abolishing this distinction, Barad is an ally of object-oriented philosophy even while opposing other forms of speculative realism. The second half of the essay criticizes Barad for conflating two entirely different senses of the word "atomism," leading to difficult consequences for her philosophy.

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[1] Since its publication in 2007, Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* has found a wide audience. The book is unusually systematic, thorough, and clear, and may provide the foundation for a durable school of contemporary thought. Barad's professional competence in physics allows her to swim in waters where others in the humanities might not dare to wade—noteworthy here is her well-developed case for Niels Bohr as a key figure in twentieth century philosophy and not just physics. Even Barad's feminism takes risks, as when the writings of Judith Butler are subjected to candid, if appreciative, critique. But perhaps the most notable feature of *Meeting the Universe Halfway* is the full-blown philosophical position that Barad calls "agential realism." This position is ambitious to say the least. As the author puts it:

This book contributes to the founding of a new ontology, epistemology, and ethics, including a new understanding of the nature of scientific practices...Indeed, the new philosophical framework that I propose entails a rethinking of fundamental concepts that support...binary thinking, including the notions of matter, discourse, causality, agency, power, identity, embodiment, objectivity, space, and time. (Barad 25–6)

[2] And further: "This shift in ontology also entails a reconceptualization of other core philosophical concepts such as space, time, matter, dynamics, agency, structure, subjectivity, objectivity, knowing, intentionality, discursivity, performativity, entanglement, and ethical engagement," (33) all of this resulting in "a profound conceptual shift" (139).

[3] I doubt that Barad overstates the case, since if one were to accept her ontology, there would indeed be significant consequences in all of these areas. But since a brief article like this one cannot hope to cover so many different themes, I will focus on what Barad calls "the core chapter of the book" (32): Chapter 4, "Agential Realism" (132–85). In this section, the heart of her philosophical position is made lucidly visible.

[4] At first glance, the word "realism" might seem to lead us hopelessly into the underbrush. Even if we ignore the vastly different meanings of "realism" in politics, mathematics and literature, the strictly philosophical uses of the term already seem to be scattered across the map. For example, the arch-idealist George Berkeley is often called a realist in the epistemological sense of a "direct realist," meaning that he believes in a direct access to reality unmediated by representations. Yet even if we confine ourselves to the purely ontological sense of the term, the polysemy continues: Lee Braver identifies six separate meanings of "realism,"<sup>[1]</sup> and in my view there is a crucial seventh sense that Braver overlooks entirely.<sup>[2]</sup>

[5] Nonetheless, there is no point exaggerating the difficulty, since we all have a loose general sense of what philosophical realism means. It is expressed clearly enough by Manuel DeLanda, one of the leading continental realists of our time: "there are philosophers who grant reality full autonomy from the human mind...These philosophers are said to have a *realist ontology*" (DeLanda, 4). Realism traditionally means, first and foremost, the view that a world exists independently of the mind. Yet this sort of autonomous status of the world is precisely *not* what Barad defends, as indicated by the subtitle of her book: "Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning." When two things are entangled, it means that they are *not* autonomous, but rather that they mutually co-constitute each other.

[6] Why then does Barad call herself an agential *realist*? She defines her sense of realism as follows: "Realism...is not about representations of an independent reality but about the real consequences, interventions, creative possibilities, and responsibilities of intra-acting within and as part of the world" (37). The key phrase "intra-acting" was defined by Barad a few pages earlier:

The notion of intra-action is a key element of my agential realist framework. The neologism "intra-action" *signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*. That is, in contrast to the usual "interaction," which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. It is important to note that the "distinct" agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, *agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements*. (33)

[7] It should now be clear that Barad's sense of "realism" is precisely the opposite of the traditional one. It is also the opposite of the sense employed by present-day speculative realism, which is opposed above all to the constant correlation (cf. "correlationism") of world and thought—the very correlation that Barad recommends with her concept of "entanglement" (see Brassier *et al.*). For this reason, agential and speculative realism seem destined to be explicit opponents in contemporary philosophy, though there is no reason why this opposition needs to be a hostile one.

[8] Indeed, there is at least one key point of agreement between Barad's agential realism and the object-oriented variant of speculative realism. For one of the key features of correlationism (one retained even by Quentin Meillassoux, who is ostensibly the arch-opponent of correlationism) is its ultimately Cartesian notion that the world is split into two *kinds* of entities: human thinkers and dead physical matter.<sup>[3]</sup> Barad joins object-oriented philosophy in rejecting this notion and, in so doing, seems willing to challenge several of her intellectual models. For instance: "One pronounced limitation of Bohr's account [of experimental apparatuses]...is that the human is thereby cemented into the very foundations of the quantum theory...Bohr overshoots his mark and places the human not merely back in the picture where she or he belongs, but at the center of all that is" (143).

[9] This insight is far from trivial for contemporary philosophy, given that as prominent an author as Slavoj Žižek makes use of the very sort of subject-centered reading of quantum theory that Barad condemns (see Žižek, Pt II, Ch. 3). A similar mistake is made, we are told, by Butler and Michel Foucault, whose other admirers rarely challenge them as forcefully as Barad does: "for both Butler and Foucault, agency belongs only to the human domain...That is, both accounts honor the nature-culture binary (to different degrees)" (Barad, 145–6).

[10] For this reason, it would ultimately be unfair to call Barad a "correlationist," though quite fair to call her a "relationist" in the same sense that this term applies to both Alfred North Whitehead and Bruno Latour (see Harman *Networks*). It is unlikely that Barad would object to the term "relationism," since it makes an excellent fit with how she describes her own position. For instance: "The world is not populated with things that are more or less the same or different from one another. Relations do not follow relata, but the other way around" (136–7). And further: "This relational ontology is the basis for my posthumanist performative account of material bodies (both human and nonhuman)...[which advocates] *a relationality between specific material (re)configurings of the world through which boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted*" (139). In what remains of this essay, let us look at some of the key features of Barad's relational ontology (a.k.a. agential realism) and review some of the obstacles faced by any such position.

[11] The so-called "linguistic turn" dominated much of twentieth-century philosophy, in both its analytic and continental variants. Those who complain about this turn are often realists in the old-fashioned sense who tire of dealing with human access to the world and are eager to return to speculation on reality itself. Yet curiously enough, Barad rejects the centrality of language for the *opposite* reason: namely, she views the linguistic turn as too *realist* in the traditional sense of the term. Above all, Barad rejects "the common-sense view of representationalism—the belief that representations serve a mediating function between knower and known" (133). She abhors "the analytical stalemate that simply calls for recognition of our mediated access to the world and then rests its case" (152).

[12] Instead of "the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent pre-existing things...which positions us above or outside the world we allegedly merely reflect on," Barad adopts a "performative" standpoint that "insists on understanding, thinking, observing, and theorizing as practices of engagement with, and as part of the, the world in which we have our being" (133). The world is not a static system of

relations, but an active "doing" that first establishes boundaries between apparently discrete things (135). It is performative practices, also known as intra-actions, which make an "agential cut" in the world so as to generate such boundaries (140). The individuality of specific people and things does not pre-exist their intra-action, but is carved out of "the inherent ontological (and semantic) indeterminacy" (150) to yield an exteriority *within* phenomena rather than outside them. For this reason, Barad scraps the term "language" in favor of "discourse," though with some reservations concerning Foucault's way of using the term (146–7). Note that Barad's turn to performativity and discourse amounts to an *ontological* claim that no separation exists between humans and things, but that everything co-constitutes everything else.

[13] Let us return to Barad's approach to the status of individual things, since I write as someone who treats individuals as the core of philosophy. For Barad, by contrast, individuals are purely derivative. She states admiringly that "Bohr rejects the atomistic metaphysics that takes 'things' as ontologically basic entities. For Bohr, things do not have inherently determinate boundaries or properties, and words do not have inherently determinate meanings" (138). Instead of independent things, the world is made up of immediately palpable *phenomena*: "Reality is composed not of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but of things in phenomena" (150). There is a "dynamic process of intra-activity and materialization...[an] ongoing flow of agency" (150). And further, "statements and subjects emerge from a field of possibilities...[which is] not static or singular but rather is a dynamic and contingent multiplicity" (147). Rather than the frozen identities of fixed individuals, there is "an ongoing performance of the world in its differential dance of intelligibility and unintelligibility" (149). We know that "'things don't preexist; they are agentially enacted and become determinately bounded and propertied within phenomena" (150). What we think of as physical matter is really just "a congealing of agency" (151). As for the phenomena, they "are forever being reenfolded and reformed" (177). What we call becoming is "the inexhaustible dynamism of the unfolding of mattering" (180).

[14] *Meeting the Universe Halfway* is a rich and complicated work, one of the most sophisticated to appear in its decade. Yet it is quite possible to summarise the basic features of the book's ontology in several paragraphs, as in fact we have just done. With Barad as with most philosophers, the devil is not in the details, but in the big categorical decisions from which all else follows. Barad's philosophical standpoint can be described generally as follows: the world is a self-determining, relational structure rather than a set of pre-existent and autonomous individuals. It is a dynamic field of possibilities, a constantly folding and unfolding flux of agential cuts. This process gives rise not to enduring self-identical individuals, substances, or essences, but merely to transient congealments in a field of relations. By indicating that individual humans do not pre-exist the practices through which they are co-constituted by the rest of the world, this ontology also suggests the poverty of classic political liberalism (138), with its possible Thatcherite consequence that "society does not exist" and that only individual human voters and consumers are real. Such political individualism is paralleled nicely by classical physics and its "atomistic" (137–8) commitment to separate individuals. As Barad sees it, quantum theory (when suitably adjusted to remove a few of Bohr's lingering classical prejudices) leads directly to the dynamic relational ontology of performatively intra-active phenomena that is her philosophical creed.

[15] The key problem with Barad's ontology is perhaps most visible in her ambiguous use of the term

"atomism," a concept she disdains even while mixing two entirely different claims under its aegis. This can be seen in a pair of sentences from early in Chapter 4:

1. "The postulation of individually determinate entities with inherent properties is the hallmark of atomistic metaphysics. Atomism hails from Democritus. According to Democritus, the properties of all things derive from the properties of the smallest unit—atoms (the 'uncuttable or 'inseparable)" (138–9).
2. "Crucially...Bohr rejects the atomistic metaphysics that takes 'things as ontologically basic entities. For Bohr, things do not have inherently determinate boundaries or properties, and words do not have inherently determinate meanings" (139).

[16] The reader will note that while Statements 1 and 2 both refer polemically to "atomism," they target two entirely different philosophical claims. Statement 1 criticises what is commonly known as "reductionism." Atomism in this sense means that everything can be explained by the pieces of which it is composed, these pieces explained by their own smaller pieces, and so on down to the smallest possible pieces. This has always been the basic research program of physics and has led to tension (including accusations of "physics envy") with practitioners in sciences such as chemistry who deal with higher-level beings such as molecules, not to mention the even more macroscopic realities covered by geology, biology or sociology. Barad's Statement 1 says (and object-oriented philosophy agrees) that the way to understand an entity is not to give information about the tiniest pieces of that entity.

[17] But Barad's Statement 2 goes well beyond a complaint about a reduction to smallest entities and flatly denies that there are individual entities at all. Whereas "atomism" normally means just what Statement 1 says it means, Barad now uses a terminological sleight of hand to suggest that the belief in any individuals at all is itself a form of atomistic reductionism. This leads to the strange result that, from Barad's standpoint, someone who believes in the existence of tables and chairs as irreducible to their subcomponents—such as me (see Harman, *The Quadruple Object*)—and someone who thinks that tables and chairs are ontological frauds that must be eliminated in favour of the simplest physical particles of which they are built—such as Peter van Inwagen (see van Inwagen, *Material Beings*)—are both adherents of "atomism." The rather glaring difference between these two positions, one object-oriented and the other very *anti*-object-oriented, has strangely been converted into irrelevant nuance. The difference between them is invisible to Barad because, for her, both tiny physical particles and mid-sized tables and chairs are equally derivative in comparison with a primal dynamic whole, a dance of difference in which fleeting congealments sometimes occur, and in which everything constitutes and is constituted by everything else.

[18] This complaint is not just a matter of nitpicking Barad's use of the word "atomism." The philosophical stakes here could hardly be higher, since the whole of Barad's worldview (including her ethics and politics) follows from her dismissive view of individual things. In closing, I will try to show briefly how this makes Barad a different type of reductionist closely allied to the old-fashioned atomist of Statement 1, and that only the philosophy of individual things wrongly described as "atomism" in Statement 2 is able to save us from the perils of reductionism.

[19] In numerous publications since 2009, I have spoken of the conceptual pair "undermining" and "overmining," both of which are to be regarded as harmful (Harman, "On the Undermining of Objects"; Harman, "Materialism Must Be Destroyed"). Undermining is the intellectual strategy launched by the pre-Socratics, those inventors of Western philosophy and science alike. Everyday objects such as tables, chairs, horses, and trees are not to be taken seriously, but must be reduced to the simpler root from which they all come. This could be some physical element (water, air, fire or multiple elements mixed by love and hate), it could be some pre-objective and pre-individual lump able to become and absorb all things (the famous *apeiron* of Anaximander and others), or it could be atoms of various shapes and sizes swirling through the void and forming compound things (Leucippus and Democritus). This approach lives on today in the more sophisticated quest of subatomic physics, and in certain recent philosophers who prefer the flux of the pre-individual to the determinate outlines of individual things (Gilbert Simondon is a fine example).

[20] I join Barad in rejecting such atomism, which fails to account for those properties of compound things that are not found in their tiny subcomponents, and fails as well to explain why things seem to be robust in the face of many changes in their pieces. Although undermining works validly in many cases (as when correctly reducing "morning star" and "evening star" to the planet Venus), it fails as a global debunking effort that seeks to reduce everything to a pampered caste of tiniest particles or primordial structural fields. Undermining treats individual objects as too *shallow* to be the truth and seeks to replace them either with a micro-army of tinier things or a primordial lump of indeterminate flux.

[21] But there is another form of reduction that proceeds upwards rather than downwards—a form common in modern and contemporary thought. Here the object is treated not as too shallow to be the truth, but as *too deep*. There is nothing hiding behind the events through which things interact (or, more felicitously, *intra-act*), nothing behind their phenomenal character or performative articulation. The thing is always what it appears to be, and is not some vague thing-in-itself outside the fray of the world.

[22] The problem with this sort of theory, which we can designate with the term "overmining," is that by stripping individuals of all cryptic character, by making them nothing more than what they accessibly are here and now, we deprive them of any unexpressed reservoir that might lead to future change. The world thereby becomes static, no matter how much one might protest with alibi-like assertions of the inherent dynamism, flux, or conatus of the world. Change is merely asserted rather than earned, as with Molière's *vis dormitiva*. This is the ultimate problem with Barad's abandonment of things in favour of intra-active phenomena: any given phenomenon, like all of its phenomenal neighbours, has no hidden volcanic energy that could ever lead it to turn into something different. In this sense, Barad's philosophy is an overmining theory that rashly sacrifices the explosive undercurrents belonging only to individual things, withdrawn from full expression in the world at any given moment. Lest this sound like too extreme a portrayal of her position, the reader is reminded of this passage: "*agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements*" (33). The entanglement of beings precedes their separate existence as individuals, a theme that marks Barad's interpretation of quantum theory no less than her own original philosophical position.

[23] To escape the consequences of such stasis, Barad can only appeal to the primal energies of the whole—the dance of differences that occasionally congeals into individual things. But as the reader may have noted already, this simply bolsters the cracks in Barad's overmining position by means of a supplemental undermining position. First the world is depicted as a highly differentiated, overmined landscape of performative, intra-active, and entangled apparatuses configured into specific phenomena through agential cuts. Yet, second, in order to explain how this landscape could ever be transformed, we are told of the undermining pre-individual fertility of a dynamic folding and unfolding cosmos. This internal tension between two forms of reduction is hardly unique to Barad, but is rather the original sin of every anti-object-oriented position, every philosophy that wants to dismiss the role of individuals in ontology. Elsewhere I have given it the name "duominging" (Harman, "Undermining, Overmining, and Duominging").

[24] By undermining and overmining individual things simultaneously, duominging (a tendency that encompasses most Western philosophy and science) succeeds only in securing a twofold reductionism, while eliminating the true protagonist of philosophy: individual things, withdrawn from full expression in the world. In this respect, Barad's ontology is not quite as original as it seems. For Barad as for so many other philosophers, reductionism enters not only through the back door, but through the front door as well.

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## Footnotes

1. See the table at the beginning of Lee Bravers *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism*.
  2. For a critical analysis of Bravers book, see Harman, "A Festival of Anti-Realism: Bravers History of Continental Thought."
  3. See Meillassoux, "Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign." This lecture can be found on numerous blogs. Meillassoux wishes to emphasize that it is "work in progress."
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