

***What’s the Matter? Agential Realism as a Way of Understanding the World’s Relational Becoming***

INTRODUCTION

Karen Barad’s agential realism is a fruitful way to understand matter and reality in its relational becoming, building on the idea of agential separability in contrast to the mainstream metaphysics of ontological separateness.

One of the manifestations of the idea of separateness is individualism, and supporting Barad’s rejection of individualism I will try to briefly outline the contrasting concept of *dividuality*, to capture Barad’s view that the things of the world are not to be understood as separate pre-existing individuals, but as always already related *dividuals*, that is, agentially separable things-in-phenomena.

Using Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the *flesh*, I conclude by discussing Barad’s idea of agency as a function of being, and not as an exclusive property of human beings, and the question if we are to affirm Aristotle’s claim that there must be something prior to and causing sensation.

ARISTOTLE’S POLEMICS AGAINST THE ALLEGED RELATIVISM OF PROTAGORAS

In the fourth book of *Metaphysics* (1009a6ff) Aristotle polemicizes against the (alleged) relativism of Protagoras, that, according to Aristotle, violates the fundamental law of logic that nothing at one and the same time can both be A and not-A. The question is if Aristotle does justice to Protagoras’s position. I understand Protagoras as holding that all propositions of the type X is A should be replaced by or be read as propositions of the type X is A in relation to P,<sup>1</sup> that is: all propositions about things should be replaced by, or understood as, propositions about relations.

Aristotle claims that Protagoras holds that one and the same thing at one and the same time can be both A and not-A, but what Protagoras actually holds is that X simultaneously can be A as part of one relation and not-A as part of another relation. That is: Protagoras does not say anything about things-in-themselves or of qualities inherent in things but of relations between a perceiving subject and a perceived object.

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<sup>1</sup> For this understanding I am indebted to the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess. See *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, by Arne Naess & David Rothenberg, pp 54-57, discussing Protagoras and Niels Bohr as representing a “both-and”-theory.

Protagoras fails to discriminate between how something appears to man and how something is in itself, says Aristotle, and claims that sense perception is not its own object, but that the senses must perceive *something*, that is the ground for and causes the sense impression. Aristotle writes:

that the substrata which cause the sensation should not exist even apart from sensation is impossible. For sensation is surely not the sensation of itself, but there is something beyond the sensation, which must be prior to the sensation.

Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, book IV, 1010b31ff.

Had Aristotle chosen the singular instead of the plural when naming this "something" that is primary to sense perception, *substratum* instead of *substrata*, the history of philosophy, along with our understanding of reality, might have been quite different. The idea of a plural substrate easily leads the thought to assume the existence of a manifold of different "things-in-themselves" as some kind of "Real" counterparts to each and everyone of the objects or at least classes of objects adhering to our sense perception, the latter thereby understood as less real or as "just appearance".

Here is an important line of demarcation: Protagoras holds that there are no fixed and ready separate objects "out there", before and independently of any relation to an experiencing subject; that there are no "things-in-themselves". But possibly we have to posit a something, which is no *thing*, but not *nothing*, as in some way causing the sense perceptions, or at least a something that is the prerequisite of perception.

I will return to the questions of how to possibly understand this "something", but first, let us have a look at Karen Barad's agential realism, as a way of understanding matter and reality in its relational becoming.

#### BARAD'S AGENTIAL REALISM

A central trait of Western philosophy and worldview is the habit, with roots in Plato and Aristotle, to view beings or things as separate entities, discrete individuals with intrinsic properties. This individualist assumption has far-reaching consequences and permeates not only philosophical discourse but our life as a whole, and it is an integral part of the mainstream masculine metaphysics of separateness, that in a profound way is challenged by Barad's agential realism (see my article "Challenging Mainstream Metaphysics", where I also discuss how Barad's thinking can further feminist philosophy of religion).

Barad rejects the whole idea of "individually determinate entities with inherent properties" (Barad 2003:812), and claims that this "thingification", i.e., our seeing and speaking of "entities", "things" and "relata" instead of relations, distorts our understanding of the world and ourselves, and of how we are related. As opposed to the metaphysics of separateness, Barad's agential realism offers a relationalist metaphysics, according to which the ontological primary is not pre-existing, ontologically separate things or objects but agentially produced *phenomena*.

Barad's use of the term phenomena has its origin in Niels Bohr's philosophy-physics, where it denotes the intra-active relation between an observed object and the agencies of observation. There is, according to Bohr, no given pre-existing cut between the object of observation and the agencies of observation, but a cut is enacted in a specific context as part of the experimental set-up, the *apparatus*.

Through a reading together of Bohr's and Foucault's understanding of the apparatus, Barad is able to let the concept benefit from Foucault's rich sociological interpretation. In Barad's usage, the apparatuses are not "static arrangements *in* the world, but [...] dynamic (re)configurings *of* the world" (Barad 2003: 816), and thereby both parts of phenomena, and phenomena themselves. Bohr's solution to the quandary of the wave-particle-duality of light was the insight that the expressions "wave" and "particle" did not describe an intrinsic light-property, but the result of different specific intra-actions. Thus, the referent is not a separate pre-existing object with certain inherent properties or qualities (there simply *is* no such thing), but the *phenomenon*, of which the apparatus is an inextricable part.

This understanding of different apparatuses amounting to different intra-actions, and therefore different phenomena, makes it possible to interpret Protagoras's position in a more charitable way than does Aristotle. Not as a self-cancelling and logically contradictory relativistic position, but as a fully plausible relationalism. Here it is also important to stress that although Barad writes about "measurements", her agential realism is applicable also outside the scientific laboratory. As Joseph Rouse has remarked: "Any causal intra-action is implicitly a measurement in Barad's sense" (Rouse 2004: 158, n8). This means that her theorizing about relations, relata and phenomena has relevance also for extra-scientific intra-activity, and I suggest that every perception can be considered as a measurement. An interesting point in this context is that Merleau-Ponty describes the body's senses as "measurants for Being" (*The Visible and the Invisible* (VI):103).

It is important to notice, that for Barad phenomena don't just mark the ontological non-separateness of the observer and the observed. Phenomena are also *the ontological entanglement of intra-acting 'agencies'*, that is, contrary to the pervasive individualism and atomism of mainstream masculine metaphysics, with its obvious-matter-of-fact-view of relata as prior to relations, Barad holds that "phenomena are ontologically primitive relations – relations without pre-existing relata" (Barad 2007:139).

Barad's notion of intra-action (in contrast to the common 'interaction,' presuming the priority of independent entities) represents a paradigmatic change of perspective. Instead of separately pre-existing "things", there for us to interact with, Barad gives an account of a relational "production of material bodies", through "agential intra-acting" (Barad 2003:814). Instead of a separately existing object of knowledge, measured as to its inherent properties by a neatly demarcated individual subject, we get a *phenomenon*, understood as "the [ontological] inseparability of 'observed object' and 'the agencies of observation'" (ibid.).

Since the ontological primary for Barad is the relational phenomenon, and "relata only exist *within* phenomena as a result of specific intra-actions" (Barad 2003:815, n20), relata are not ontologically separate individuals pre-existing interaction, but rather agentially separable *dividuals* emerging through intra-actions.

#### AGENTIAL SEPARABILITY AS DIVIDUALITY

The term "dividual" is not used by Barad, but I find it adequate to express the non-dualist relatedness at the root of her metaphysics. I have borrowed the term from the American anthropologist McKim Marriot, who uses it to describe an alternative concept of personhood to be found in South Asia, where "persons [...] are not thought [...] to be 'individual', that is, indivisible, bonded units, as they are in much of Western social and psychological theory as well as in common sense. Instead, it appears that persons are generally thought by the South Asians to be 'dividual' or divisible" (Marriot 1976:111).

I find the term "dividual" useful as a counter-concept to individual, to express the understanding that the ontological primary is the relation – not the relata. It is not the case that we first have individual entities, and that these individual entities then interact with each other. The primary is the *dividual*, always already intra-actively related – ontologically non-separate, and only agentially separable. Seeing human and other beings as dividuals rather

than individuals helps to bring home the idea that the relation is the primary, not the relata. The individuals, the relata, not only are *what* they are depending on the relation, they cannot meaningfully be said to *exist* independently of the relation – to exist is to be related. For Merleau-Ponty identity is not a question of individuality, not an atom, but “a certain node in the woof of the simultaneous and the successive [...] a concretion of visibility” (VI:132). And this relatedness is global, both for Merleau-Ponty and Barad; it is not the case that human beings alone through their material-discursive practices lend existence and essence to all there is – agency is not an exclusive property of human beings, but a function of Being.

#### THE FLESH OF THE WORLD AND AGENCY AS A FUNCTION OF BEING

Agential realism is explicitly relationalist in that it builds on the idea of an intra-active entanglement, dismantling (without collapsing) long cherished dichotomies as subject-object, culture-nature and mind-matter. Barad’s universe is teeming with “matter-in-the-process-of-becoming” (“Posthumanist Performativity”:140), and she stresses the importance of recognizing matter as an active participant in this process, not just as passive raw material.

The world iteratively articulates itself in and through phenomena. For Merleau-Ponty as for Barad the phenomenon is the ontological primary. The question is if they use the term in the same sense. I am aware of Barad’s word of warning in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, “not to read Bohr’s emphasis on phenomena as phenomenalism” (431, n38), but you should not read Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on phenomena as phenomenalism either, because in his later writings he criticizes the idea of merely defining subject and world as reciprocal, and stresses that they mutually imply and define each other, and do so because they are both differentiations of a basic primordial Being which includes them both.

This all-encompassing primordial and unitary Being is called “flesh” (*chair*). It is seen as the originary source of phenomena, and is the main idea of Merleau-Ponty’s new ontology as he presents it in his posthumously published unfinished work *The Visible and the Invisible*.

The early Merleau-Ponty rejects the dualisms consciousness-world and mind-matter, but does not question the duality. But in his later work he questions his earlier idea of an external intentionality mind-world, and shifts to an *internal* intentionality, an intentionality operating not inside the mind, but inside of Being (VI:244), that is “the flesh”, seen as a “spatializing-temporalizing vortex.”

Merleau-Ponty stresses our "belongingness to the world" (VI:27); rather than being *in* the world we are "*of* the world" (an expression also used by Barad).

Merleau-Ponty's position is that the phenomenal world, as an "in-itself-for-us" is the real world, the lived world. Every phenomenon emerges within and as part of this lived and finite world, and is therefore partial or situated. But it would be overhasty to attribute this situatedness solely to the perceiving subject, which would presuppose the very dualism between subject and object that Merleau-Ponty (like Barad) challenges. The partiality is necessary for the actual becoming of things; since things are things-in-phenomena, partiality does not undermine reality or objectivity, it is, on the contrary, the only way to become, the only way to come to matter.

Merleau-Ponty posits a kind of pre-world, out of which the phenomenal world arises, an "inexhaustible reservoir from which things are drawn" (*Phenomenology of Perception*:401; Nordlander:169f), a cornucopia of "brute being". The things of the world can be seen as events of brute being emerging in and through phenomena.

The flesh is undivided, but dividual, that is divisible. As Barad says, a cut must be enacted, but the cut is not enacted in thin air, to Merleau-Ponty it is the flesh that we cut. Cutting means enacting/invoking a difference in an undifferentiated, indeterminate Being. The Flesh comes to matter through agential intra-action. Every perception, every sensing, is a cut that opens the flesh of Being and possibilizes articulation. The opening is a cutting apart, but through the specific entangled articulation, it is also a cutting *together*, since the words and things that emerge when the Flesh comes to matter are always things-in-phenomena.

Vicky Kirby writes in *Quantum Anthropologies*, that she sees the "same understanding of phenomenal complexity" in Barad and Merleau-Ponty (Kirby 2011:127). And that when Merleau-Ponty says that the material ground of the senses (i.e., Nature [or Flesh]) does not constitute a realm that can be violated by imperfect linguistic description (i.e., Culture), this means that language *is* difference, "not the difference between one thing and another, but a process that gives rise to the perception of an event as a divided [or, as I prefer, dividual] phenomenon" (ibid).

A key concept of Merleau-Ponty's is *dehiscence*. Merleau-Ponty speaks about the dehiscence of Being, how the undivided primordial flesh explodes and articulates itself, in and as dimensions, styles and things. The word *dehiscence* has a double meaning: as a medical term

it is used to denote the release of materials by the cutting open of an organ or tissue; as a botanical term it is used for a spontaneous opening to release content, as when a flower releases its seeds. I find this a very useful metaphor to capture Barad's idea of agency. Agency is what enacts the cuts in the flesh of Being, bringing forth phenomena.

Madison, commenting on Merleau-Ponty, writes that it "seems to be our bodily presence in the midst of this pre-world which calls into being space, movement, time, things, and finally the world itself in the proper sense" (Madison:35). But I think this is an unnecessarily human-centred interpretation, especially if we deal with the later Merleau-Ponty, who in the *Course Notes from the Collège de France* on the concept of nature, affirms Nature's own productivity and agency, and criticizes the ontology of modernism, which he traces back to Descartes, and which only sees nature as natured, and forgets nature as naturing, that is, its active, agential aspect. Like sensing, agency is a function of Being, not a property of a subject opposed to the world.

"The flesh" is not matter, not mind, not substance, but is, Merleau-Ponty says, to be understood along the lines of a pre-socratic element, and is like these elements not visible or tangible in itself, but *part* and prerequisite of everything visible and tangible. For this to resonate well with Merleau-Ponty's flesh as the prototype of Being and the matrix of all that exists, I would like to add the dimension of the pre-socratic philosopher Anaximander's alternative to the classical elements, his *to apeiron*, i.e., the indefinite, boundless, unlimited.

#### THE SOMETHING THAT IS NOT SOME THING

Aristotle's solution to the problem of the ground for our sensations was to postulate substrata as material causes and carriers of qualities. Merleau-Ponty's solution is the singular, undivided flesh, which has the character of a pre-socratic element, that are not material, not a thing, but "the root of all things". As an element the flesh is that which enters into the composition of everything, but never appears in itself, because it is nothing in itself, other than "brute being" and "wild logos" (Madison:176). It is something but not some *thing*.

The best answer to the question "What's the matter?", seems to be: nothing *is* the matter. At least it seems as no *thing* is the matter, but that things *come* to matter in the world's ongoing selfarticulation.

Instead of the "the Word was made flesh", as stated in the Prologue to the Gospel of John, we could say, with Merleau-Ponty, that the flesh becomes world.

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