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Karen Barad's Onto-Ethico-Epistemology as an Apparatus of Empowerment in Contextual Theologies

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Abstract

Karen Barad's onto-ethico-epistemology, which develops at the crossroads of philosophy and the technoscientific realm, has not yet been applied in religious studies and theology. This article demonstrates that Barad's methodology, called agential realism, is an appropriate analytic and performative tool for rethinking liberation practices within contextual theologies, such as black, Latino/a, feminist, or Dalit theology. Agential realism goes beyond dualistic tendencies in knowledge-producing practices by focusing on the concept of response-ability and an ethics of entanglement. I investigate agential realism's practical operability in the empowerment of marginal groups. The research was performed in the Cenacolo Community, a Christian grassroots initiative intended to restore the dignity of drug addicts.

Introduction

[1] This essay introduces Karen Barad's agential realism, developed at the crossroads of philosophy and the technoscientific realm, into the field of religious studies and social work. I apply Barad's methodology, called agential realism, as an analytic and performative tool within the context of liberation theologies, aimed at challenging the structures of social, economic, and religious oppression through the empowerment of marginal groups.

[2] Agential realism goes beyond dualistic tendencies in its knowledge-producing practices, by focusing on the concept of response-ability and an ethics of entanglement. The underlying methodology of the research relies on agential realism's central concepts of diffraction, indeterminacy, apparatus, differentiation, dynamic ethics, entanglement and relationality. The preliminary results, presented in this essay, show that the methodology of agential realism significantly adds to the capacity of empowerment projects to deal with complex personal and societal issues. Binary oppositions are resolved by differentiations that distinguish but do not exclude. The dynamism of agential realism as an empowering mechanism is highly applicable in social work: agential realism's ethical concerns, based on response-ability, contribute to balanced views and allows for peaceful and gradual change within the empowering framework of liberation theologies.

[3] The term 'liberation theologies' is often interchangeable with the term 'contextual theologies' (even if the latter has a more descriptive sound to it), which emerged in the early 1970s in various situations of marginalization and oppression, of which the Latin American variant became the most famous. The leading thread of this new way of theologizing was a critical approach to social, political, and religious praxis, based on a belief in a God who opts for the poor. Instead of a theological reflection that starts from obscure metaphysical realms heavily charged with power issues, the new point of departure was the embodied everyday life of marginal and oppressed groups in the society (see e.g. Marsh). From the 1990s onward, when capitalism became a 'new religion', contextual theologies have become a part of the so-called 'globalization critique', looking for alternative political, economic, and societal models on local and global levels (Vuola).

[4] In order to explore the capacity of agential realism to be applied in the process of empowerment of marginal groups, I test its features in the grassroots movement of the Cenacolo community. The mission of this movement is to empower people from the margins of society, mainly—but not exclusively—drug addicts. The process of empowerment takes place through the transfiguration of the wounded bodies of drug addicts by their engagement in the creative transfiguration of the material world that surrounds them. This pedagogical method was developed by religious Sister Rita Agnese Petrozzi, the founder of the Cenacolo Community, in close collaboration with the users of the method, the drug addicts themselves.

[5] I develop the argument starting with a brief overview of the nature of the Cenacolo Community and of the empowering method developed through intra-actions of the community members with Sister Petrozzi, the founder of the community. I then proceed with a diffractive reading of Petrozzi and Barad, developing my argument in a somewhat fragmented way. Fragmentation, however, does not mean disconnection. On the contrary, fragmentation allows for a multiplication of connections, asks for new solutions, opens space for surprise, for the unexpected, for a life to emerge (Petrozzi, *Abbraccio* 92). Considering the human condition as a continuous assemblage and re-assemblage of fragmented parts (Legg), of which smaller parts are elementary particles, and a variety of possibilities that call—and force—us to decide and re-decide continuously, I invite the reader to participate in conclusion-making practices throughout the article. The method applied here is in line with what Manuel DeLanda calls the "neo-assemblage theory" or "assemblage theory 2.0": not a fully-fledged method but one which recognizes the complexity of (Cenacolo community) apparatuses, without boxing them in rigid categories (4).

The Cenacolo Community

[6] The Cenacolo community (Cenacolo) was founded by Sister Petrozzi in 1983 in Saluzzo, a small town in northern Italy. Petrozzi was deeply moved by the crowds of young people on Italian streets who had fallen into heavy drug addiction, which was a severe problem at the time. The model of the Basic Ecclesial Communities, coming from Latin American social and religious liberation practices, seemed to fit Petrozzi's vision. It was a style of life with relations based on mutual respect and equality, rather than on hierarchical subordinations. It allowed Petrozzi to incorporate the life experiences of young people into the foundations of the community.



Figure 1: Petrozzi with two co-Sisters in Villa El Salvador, located on the outskirts of Lima, Peru.

[7] From the very beginning, the Cenacolo members, mainly drug addicts with a complex life history, felt the community to be their own, not imposed by 'experts', or 'social workers', or the 'church'. In other words, they were not clients or patients, but participants. Their opinion was crucial, and only after that comes the opinion of experts, social workers and ordained religious persons. Although Petrozzi was an initiator and a leading force of the Community, the method itself was developed by the community members, with Petrozzi intervening from time to time and shaping nuances. Today there are sixty fraternities spread over eighteen countries in Europe, Africa, and South and North America. In these sixty fraternities there are about 1500 members sharing their lives in fullness by living together during the rehabilitation period.

[8] A typical Cenacolo fraternity has ten to thirty members of which the majority spend two to three years in the rehabilitation program, living on the premises of the community and usually organised in the form of a farm in the suburbs of major cities. The day is filled with work, fellowship, prayer and sports. After the rehabilitation program, they continue their life as ordinary citizens. Cenacolo has also opened its doors to elderly people in Europe, street children in Latin America, families, religious persons, young unmarried mothers, people with mental or physical problems and many others.

[9] In this article, my focus is on the daily routine of the members within the fraternities, as this is the basis of the rehabilitation programme and the core of the Cenacolo methodology. The life in Cenacolo is based on an *ora et labora* model, where work and prayer are two main pillars. However, in Cenacolo the

term 'prayer', besides its common meaning of verbal, cognitive or emotional activity/engagement, has a much broader meaning. Prayer is taken out of the context of meditation and verbalization, and agency is assigned to it: work, dialogue, eating, resting, sport, everything is considered—at least potentially—as prayer. Petrozzi insists that "real prayer starts outside the chapel, nel quotidiano" (Abbraccio 63). In the Cenacolo community, that which is usually called spirituality is an intrinsic part of material practice. In all examples that follow, these two aspects, material and spiritual, are intertwined through a series of intra-actions.

Methodology as an Apparatus of Becoming

[10] In Barad's agential realist account, an apparatus is understood as an entangled juxtaposition of the observer and that which is observed, of the way these two interact, and of the knowledge produced (237). Therefore, the apparatus is constituted by the method, the apparatus produces the method, and the apparatus is the method. So the goal of the Cenacolo apparatus is to re-awaken its members, especially those fallen deeply into drug-addiction, to a new, relational, self-confident and flourishing life. The Cenacolo apparatus grew naturally out of the desire of Petrozzi to empower the poor by sharing her life with them. The primary task of the apparatus was to create a path which lead the poor to be poor no longer, or at least to be poor in a creative and meaningful way. In the case of Cenacolo, poverty is not material. On the contrary, many of the young drug addicts come from a middle or upper class family background. In Cenacolo communities poverty has a very European face: radically reduced physical, psychological and spiritual capacities. Hence, the term 'poverty' used in this article must primarily be understood as a sense of inadequacy to respond to life in a proper way.

[11] Daily life in a Cenacolo fraternity is continuously configured and re-configured through a series of intra-actions of different actors: between members of the community, people from outside, weather conditions, the economic situation, the landscape, etc. Material and spiritual reconfigurations are enfolded by hundreds of agential cuts enacted in specific situations every day. Intentionally, the community does not have any written rules or regulations. This is to allow life to regulate itself. Theoretically, the idea of a group of 30 or 50 people living together without fixed rules can seem potentially chaotic. In practice, harmony reigns in Cenacolo fraternities all over the world, from Europe to Latin America, from Africa to the United States. The cause of this harmony is mutual response-ability, i.e., attentiveness to the other, both human and non-human. The basic rule is an ethical one: be response-able. Make yourself capable to respond. Become receptive towards yourself, towards other humans, towards animals, towards nature, towards material things. Ethics shows itself as a sublime regulatory factor.

[12] The Cenacolo community does not have professional staff; it is self-regulated. The members themselves deal with problems of addiction, rehabilitation, farming, cooking, hygiene, agriculture, sawing, woodworking, accounting, etc. The members have not received any formal training and many of them come from the abyss of self-destruction. According to an agential realist account, knowledge is not primarily acquired by seeing from above or outside. Rather, knowing is an embodied practice, configured through material intra-actions. For this reason, Cenacolo members intra-act in numerous daily activities.

They work, eat, play and pray together. By living together they develop specific practices through which their life on the farm is differently articulated day by day. Their lives are intra-related, they know each other. The content of their daily life is not prefigured in advance; there are no precise plans. This does not mean that there are no plans at all—it means that all plans are by default open to change. The plan (which, as it has been said already, does not exist as a fixed procedure or target) comes into existence through the ongoing performance of daily activities and events in their differential interplay. These activities and events are rather simple. Nevertheless, when a new person, typically a drug addict, enters into the community, almost everything is unintelligible: he or she does not understand why they should wake up at 6 in the morning, what the benefits are of sincerity and discipline, why one should work when there are social benefits, and so on. However, through the dynamic of intra-actions among 'older' and 'younger' members, with a special emphasis on the attentive response-ability in inter-personal relations, a differential play of intelligibility and unintelligibility continues to be performed and meaning gradually emerges.

[13] I will give an example to illustrate the process of Cenacolo intra-action. Two members, one who has been in the community for a while ('older') and another, who has just arrived ('younger'), cut wood in the courtyard. For the young member this work is nonsensical, he does not care about the winter that will arrive soon, about fraternity or about himself. The only thing he wants to do is to sleep and then take a substance. However, there are no drugs and sleeping is limited to night hours. Nevertheless, the younger member, as time passes, step by step, through manual work, sweat, dialogue, and explanation, accepts that his work is reasonable, justified and useful. Usually it takes weeks or even months, but understanding and intelligibility emerge. It is not about perfectly elaborated explanations, but about practice. This is the process of rehabilitation in the Cenacolo community: by daily intra-activity small pieces of the world become connected and owned again. Understanding emerges from these apparently insignificant daily events, by which patterns of regular daily life become intelligible to members of the community.



Figure 2: Cenacolo members at work: an 'old' and a 'new' guy cutting wood. Note the entanglement of humans and non-humans (wood, saw, sawhorse, technology of cutting, place, time, climate, nature, sky, air, etc.) that produces a material change (rehabilitation) in their lives by entanglements of matter (bodies, wood, tools) and meaning (friendship, engagement, communion, self-giving).

Blurred Boundaries as a Secure Methodological Foundation

[14] An important feature of the Cenacolo method is its implicit embrace of a weakening of boundaries between people, procedures, hierarchical relations and things. Almost all boundaries in the Cenacolo rehabilitation method are more or less blurred. I will explain how this works by looking at the example of the apparatus of the 'guardian angel'. Using the example of the guardian angel I aim to show how Barad's notions of agency and matter, emerging from the technoscientific realm, can be used as educational and empowerment tools.

[15] A guardian angel is a person who has been in the community for some time, usually from eight months to two years. He or she takes care of newly arrived boys and girls. The two stay together for approximately two months and the newly arrived learns the basics of the community's style of life with the help of the old boy or girl. The old member is a support, friend, listener, co-worker, teacher, brother, or sister: a point of reference. In the beginning, the older members help the younger ones in every aspect of their life, even with very simple things, like making the bed, brushing the teeth or lacing up shoes. This is because people who come to the community are often deprived of basic life skills. Or rather, years of addiction have left their marks on their bodies and buried the desire to live a 'normal' life. However, the aim of the guardian angel apparatus is not merely for the older member to help the

younger. Rather, the process of empowerment cuts across formal and informal hierarchical relations.



Figure 3: Cenacolo members at work: an 'old' and a 'new' girl in the garden. Relations (\approx ethics) are crucial in the entanglement of matter (\approx ontology) and meaning (\approx epistemology).

[16] The crucial point of the guardian angel apparatus is abandoning of dualistic conceptions of helper and helped. There is no fixed boundary between the two, rather, boundaries are drawn and redrawn continuously, through intra-actions. Who intra-acts? Everything and everyone. The older member, the younger member, other members, plants, animals, tools, buildings, weather conditions, memories, hopes, the daily menu, national holidays, religious and political convictions, prejudices, clothes worn, the presence of everything that is present and the absence of everything that is absent. Agential cuts are performed continuously, hundreds and thousands every day. Each decision, even the smallest one (for example, whether we should go from the house to the stable through the courtyard or by the garage), is an agential cut filled with active potential, in the Baradian sense.



Figure 4: Waves as fundamental onto-ethico-epistemological category are used to illustrate the efficacy of the blurred boundaries within the Cenacolo method of empowerment.

[17] Each act performed is an 'act of measurement', i.e. the subject decides what is chosen, what is excluded, and how this is interpreted. Only some of the acts are deliberate, while many of them are spontaneous or semi-spontaneous, i.e. they depend on occasional factors outside the direct control of those who perform the cuts. Cuts are not only a human's privilege—they happen in the intra-action of non-humans as well, including plants, animals, and so called 'un-animated matter' (Barad 396).

[18] Going back to the concept of the guardian angel, the point is that by establishing an environment where blurred boundaries are acknowledged as an educational tool, a whole new range of possibilities are presented. It is not only the younger member who, from the incapacity to lace up his shoes, after five months becomes able to carry a wheelbarrow full of cement, but the older member is educated as well. The older member learns how to be a father, a mother, a brother, a sister. She or he learns how to be patient and how to understand the other. Both participants heal deep wounds within their family and social relations. Actually, the method is established in a way that makes it impossible to say who benefits more, the 'guardian' or the 'guarded', the 'teacher' or the 'pupil', the 'assistant' or the 'patient'. Therefore, in agential realist terms, we have here a phenomenon of complementarity, based on indeterminacy, and not on uncertainty. The old and the young member, through a series of intra-actions, grow and develop and re-develop their hidden potentials. They become new persons, often to the great surprise and amazement of all, above all their parents. In Petrozzi's words, 'guard' and 'to be guarded' are two sides of the same coin, which reveal two basic human needs: the immense need to be loved and to love. The one who enters into the rehabilitation process has a deep need to be loved, cared for, and protected; and to later become one who loves, cares and protects newer, still vulnerable members. The human path

from being guarded to guarding, from being loved to loving, is travelled together (Abbraccio 64-5).

[19] The key in the Cenacolo method is the abandonment of Cartesian-based concepts of subject and object, of observer and observed, nature and culture, religious and secular life, and similar dualistic categorizations. The Cenacolo method clearly uncovers the artificiality of dualist ontologies and epistemologies, showing them inconsistent with the nature of things. That is, through this case study I show that Barad's insights on the non-dualistic nature of nature, gained in microscopic approach to the nature of things, are valid at interpersonal and societal levels as well. Moreover, non-dualistic epistemologies can be managed in a coherent—although not always simple—epistemological and ontological framework. Therefore, various binary oppositions collapse, as a new method emerges, which explicitly recognizes the entangled nature of the world and the multiplicity of relations and connections between everything that exists—visible and invisible.

[20] However, there is another entanglement between dualism and non-dualism. In the Cenacolo method dualisms are not completely rejected. Western people, the majority of the Cenacolo members, are so much under the influence of dualistic worldviews that the Cenacolo methodology partially maintains dualisms in its language and in its organizational forms, to be comprehensible and effective. Thus, dualisms still exist as a category, but the method is applied in a way that continuously reconfigures boundaries and allows life to flourish. The hidden potential of mutual empowerment is recognized and methodologically introduced into daily life, where entanglements are used as vehicles of change.

[21] Looking at it from another agential realist perspective, the boundary between 'subject' (older member ≈ former drug addict ≈ teacher) and 'object' (new member ≈ drug addict ≈ pupil) is not fixed and it does not precede the intra-action of particular practices (there are no fixed written rules, procedures and instructions in the Cenacolo communities). However, it is important to notice that the boundaries are not arbitrary (Barad 359). What happens is that "object and subject emerge through and as part of the specific nature of the material practices that are enacted" (359). Within the Cenacolo method 'material practices' are simple situations of everyday life, like cooking, cleaning, masonry, farming, carpentry, etc. These practices are the background of 'discursive practices', i.e. dialogue, cooperation, discussion, opposition, collision, dispute, reconciliation, etc. The two are interrelated, one does not precede the other but both co-constitute the canvas where the new life of the members is built from one moment to another.

The Nature of Knowledge-making Practices in Cenacolo

[22] After several examples that illustrate the process of empowerment and acquirement of new knowledge and life-skills, I will give a more detailed insight into their production. As I have already mentioned, Barad does not consider epistemology and ontology to be two different realms:

The point of challenging traditional epistemologies is not merely to welcome females, slaves, children, animals, and other dispossessed Others (exiled from the land of knowers by Aristotle more than two millennia ago) into the fold of knowers but to better account for the ontology of knowing. (Barad 378)

[23] Therefore, we need a different understanding of the deep underlying structures of knowledge making practices on an onto-epistemological level. Here Barad rejects the idea of mediation, claiming that "knowledge making is not a mediated activity. Knowing is a direct material engagement, a practice of intra-acting with the world as part of the world in its dynamic material configuring" (379). The articulation does not pass exclusively through brain cells, as they are not "the only ones that hold memories, respond to stimuli, or think thoughts" (379). In Barad's agential realist account, "intelligibility is an ontological performance of the world in its ongoing articulation" (379). The same principle is the root of the Cenacolo method: ex-drug addicts do not learn as external observers, but by participating in the conditions of their own being, on the deepest ontological levels.



Figure 5: The apparatus applied in the Cenacolo community consists of spiritual agency in real (incarnational) settings, as a day-to-day bodily re-configuration which affects both the 'helper' (here, Petrozzi herself) and those who are 'helped' (the two men in the picture).

[24] The rehabilitation process in the Cenacolo community shows that discursive practices are not only language based, but embodied: they are specific material (re)configurations of the world through which the determination of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted. In line with Barad's motto, "Not simply intervene, enact the between" by which she wants to show that we have to recognize that in knowledge-making practices we are not passive observers of the world, but intra-actors, Petrozzi's method is based on the participation of all actors (359). Petrozzi similarly does not intervene in the life of drug-addicts by providing explanations and corrections, rather she lives with them, she physically remains in the midst of their habits and problematic attitudes, she re-arranges the configurations of their lives, pointing to the hidden possibilities and unseen configurations (Nulla 7). Indeed, all the Cenacolo members participate in these intra-actions, making their mutual life flourish.

From an epistemological point of view it is important to notice that through intra-actions members do not "reveal what is already there; rather, what is 'disclosed' is the effect of the intra-active engagements of their participation with/in" (Barad 361).

The question of ethics or response-ability

[25] By acknowledging the entangled nature of nature, the Cenacolo method awakens an ethical response in its members. Entering into a dynamic inter-action with various segments of reality, Cenacolo members are trained to be responsive to everyday possibilities that help them flourish. Flourishing is understood in the terms of Corey Keyes, as a "sense that one's pursuits serve a larger purpose or otherwise hold vital meaning" (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 83). Therefore it is not about self-centred pursuits alone, but about personal growth that becomes materialized through relationality with other humans and non-humans.

[26] Although Barad does not restrict agency to human intentionality or human subjectivity, the role of humans is important, especially in social situations. Agency is a form of "'doing' or 'being' in its intra-activity" (Barad 178). As reconfigurations are continuous, every moment is a road to a different future. This implies "an ethical obligation to intra-act responsibly in the world's becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering" (Barad 178). As agency surpasses human actions, humans are not in control of events. However, they are "part of the material becoming of the universe" (Barad 178). Ethics are not a means of responding to the other as if the other were something completely outside us. In an agential realist account "'they' and 'we' are co-constituted and entangled through the very cuts 'we' help to enact" (Barad 179).

[27] However, in such a configuration, the question of objectivity arises, namely, if everything is fluid and in a process of becoming then what are the criteria for objectivity? To put it according to agential realist terms, "objectivity cannot be a matter of seeing from somewhere, as opposed to the view from nowhere (objectivism) or everywhere (relativism). There is no absolute inside or absolute outside" (Barad, 376-7). Objectivity in these terms is less related to concordance with certain procedures, and more with ethical concerns for each agential cut: the concern with "which differences matter" (Barad 378). According to Barad, "objectivity is a matter of accountability for what materializes, for what comes to be. It matters which cuts are enacted: different cuts enact different materialized becomings" (361). In the context of the Cenacolo communities, accountability is one of the keywords: be response-able in your actions, even the smallest ones, as each cut matters. Different cuts are realized through thousands of small and large decisions realized on a daily basis. The Cenacolo apparatus consists of multiple networks of knowledge, ethics, and being. It is deeply existential, alive, and dynamic: "since each intra-action matters, since the possibilities for what the world may become call out in the pause that precedes each breath before a moment comes into being and the world is remade again" (Barad 185).

Conclusion

[28] This diffractive reading of the Cenacolo method shows that Barad's agential realism can be applied to

marginal group dynamics and ethics. My analysis of the nature and the function of the empowerment apparatus is a first step in this process of diffraction, paving the way to further diffractive readings and experiences. However, the deep structural similarities between agential realism and the Cenacolo method indicate the capacity of agential realism to grasp reality and, in a sense, act upon it - in other words, to make a difference that *matters*.

[29] The greatest challenge of contextual theologies remains their own epistemological foundations. Agential realism, with its dynamic and open-ended epistemology that is simultaneously anchored in responsibility, is a methodological approach that widens the field of liberation theologians' action. First, it offers the occasion to forge new efficacious tools for material-discursive practices that can be applied at the micro level to/through individuals and small communities. Second, agential realism is an appropriate method to create a communication infrastructure which will allow for an understanding of the multiple entanglements on regional and global levels. Continuous entanglements, appropriately nurtured, can gradually create new onto-ethico-epistemological configurations on national, regional and global levels. These configurations, in their turn, can fuel, improve and sometimes even decisively change the life of persons otherwise languishing on the margins of society.

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