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Commentary

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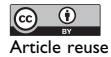
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What can flat ontology teach the legislator?

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Abstract

This commentary on James Ash's 'Flat Ontology and Geography' makes three points. First, it notes the prominence of different versions of flat ontology in human geography and supports Ash's attempt to make sense of how flat ontology thinking has impacted human geographical scholarship by working through a politically contested real-world case. Second, by framing Ash's project as a 'reality check', the commentary engages in a critical assessment of what added value flat ontological approaches, Tristan Garcia's thinking included, may have to offer to our understanding of the non-flat world of value, hierarchy and difference. Third, it locates a problematic gap between flat ontological imaginaries and the phenomenal world of importance and suggests that to avoid academic escapism, we need convincing ways to bridge this gap. To conclude, the commentary joins in Ash's caution against the overemphasis of connectedness, emergence and contingency in much flat ontological thought.

Keywords

difference, flat ontology, imaginary, phenomenal world, reality, theory

Who would have thought that one day the arid 'philosophical study of being' would become a hot topic in human geography? Not many, I bet, but these days it is difficult to find a paper that does not mention ontology in some way, shape or form (Joronen and Häkli, 2018). In his paper, James Ash (2020) directs our attention to the increasing prominence of different versions of flat ontology in human geography. Discussing approaches such as Actor Network Theory, assemblage theory and theories of affect, he is right to point out that they all emphasize connection rather than distinction between entities, and therefore tend to sit uneasily with traditional analytical thinking (in the sense of dissecting or decomposing entities). One could say that these variants of flat ontology are more attuned to differentiating, say, medicine from poison as a matter of *degree* (to which a substance interacts with a body), than medicine from placebo as a categorical difference in *kind*.

Pluralizing flat ontology to capture both relations *and* differences between entities is what Ash seeks from Tristan Garcia's (2014) ontological thought on 'form'. The paper has undeniable merits. First, it attempts to make sense of how flat ontology thinking has impacted human geography scholarship by discussing its commonalities, differences and limitations, thus contributing to methodological

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transparency in contemporary debates on agency, materiality, objects, human-nature relationships, and beyond.

Second, Ash rehearses the different variants of flat ontology through a real-world empirical question that is politically contested, institutionally framed in US legislation, and connected to the deadliest mass shooting in US history. Hence, there are ample points of reference for assessing what added value flat ontological approaches may have to offer to our understanding of one particular and very tangible set of events and issues. This approach is bold because it exposes Ash's ontological argumentation to a reality check that could easily be steered clear of in trivial, invented, or imagined empirical illustrations.

The issue at stake, as Ash formulates it, is whether a semi-automatic rifle, modified with a bump stock, fulfils the legal definition of a machine-gun, where serial fire is initiated by a single trigger pull. In itself, this is a simple question, but in real life it has been complicated by the possibility to split hairs on what constitutes a trigger pull, to claim that bump stock rifles operate on multiple trigger pulls, and on that basis to argue that a bump stock rifle is *not* a machine gun. The weapons industry, gun advocacy groups, and the firearms regulators all differ on this question for diverse reasons.

But what is it about this definitional issue that an improved flat ontology might help us resolve? Various news sources indicate that the difference between a bump stock rifle and a machine gun has for long been a politically contested issue, with manufacturers, retailers and gun rights activists arguing for the difference (and thus the legality of bump stocks) and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and a number of politicians and civic groups arguing for the non-difference (so as to ban bump stocks). We also know that, from March 26, 2019, bump stocks have been illegal to own, use or sell, testifying that the ATF's argument for non-difference prevailed. Finally, we know that several law suits have been issued by different gun rights groups to challenge the ban, but without success.

It tends to take months and sometimes longer to get ideas published in academic outlets, and in this case we could say that the world simply kept going on while Ash's treatise on the bump stock was being processed in this journal. But for the argument's sake, let us imagine that the issue is still unresolved and the legislator in dire need of help to argue for the difference, or rather non-difference, between bump stock rifle and machine gun.

In an appropriately scholarly manner, James Ash walks us through ANT, assemblage thinking, and affect theory, showing that none of these flat ontologies are particularly helpful in judging whether a bump stock is a machine gun or not. Hence, approaching difference as a matter of degree rather than kind, they all seem to fail the reality check of adding value to the legislator's efforts to settle the issue. To remedy this, Ash presents and argues for Tristan Garcia's ontological thought as an alternative to these versions of flat ontology.

The task is far from trivial because Garcia's philosophical prose tends to juxtapose oppositions without resolving their contradictions, making it at times difficult to follow. Nevertheless, Ash's exegesis of Garcia's formalist reading of the bump stock rifle appears to provide a better grasp of why it is, in essence, a machine gun. His justification is, unsurprisingly, that for both a machine gun and a bump stock rifle 'one trigger pull enables multiple rounds to fire' – a conclusion that Ash arrives at by means of Garcia's account of form that allows him to state that 'the being of a bump stock rifle is defined by its form and this form is key to how the form of a shooter begins, which enables rapid fire'. This clearly is a different way of solving the definitional issue, compared with the more conventional wording in the Final Rule by the ATF, which states that instead of focusing too much on the trigger finger, it is important to acknowledge 'other methods of initiating an *automatic* firing sequence that do not require a pull' (Federal Register, 2018: 66515, my emphasis).

One wonders, then, what the legislator might have learned from Ash's take on the definition of a machine gun. The 41-page long Final Rule document gives a detailed account of the history, previous rulings and contemporary problems of the classification of bump stocks, highlighting two issues that the legislator needed to settle in order to ban these devices as machine guns (Federal

Register, 2018). The first one is what constitutes a single trigger pull – a question that Ash discusses in terms of flat ontology – and the second is what the term 'automatic' means in the context of initiating a firing sequence – a question that Ash for some reason does not take up. Yet, the Final Rule states that to clarify the regulatory definition of machine gun it is important to define 'automatically' to mean 'so that the trigger resets and continues firing without additional physical manipulation by the shooter' (Federal Register, 2018: 66519). Obviously, for the ATF both questions were of equal importance.

With all its merits in rehearsing a complex ontological reading of the case, Ash's engagement with Garcia's formalism seems to have little to offer to this real-world exercise. Perhaps anticipating this, Ash asserts that 'a flat ontology of form does have explanatory power', but to exemplify this power, he mainly recites Garcia's formalist vocabulary instead of showing what it might actually do. To grasp why there remains a gap between Garcia's (2014) flat ontology and Ash's account of the bump stock, it may be useful to have another look on Garcia's project. It is, after all, a philosophical study of being that includes every conceivable thing in one ontological system. Like other proponents of flat ontology, Garcia's work shows that it takes a considerable amount of metaphysical imagination to arrive at a view of reality that is genuinely flat – that is, outside the phenomenal, free from the assumption of any structuring subjectivity or transcendental determinant. Further, in Garcia's work we see that this imaginary is indeed a possible one, even if difficult to achieve or grasp. It is the result of an arduous escape from the reality structured around how humans orientate in the world.

Yet, Garcia does not deny the significance of a phenomenal human reality, or 'the world of importance . . . where we act with things, appreciate them, perceive them, and think about them insofar as they matter to us' (Garcia, 2014: 31). Instead, for him the flat ontology of forms and the phenomenal world of values co-exist, but not in any hierarchical relation (one not below or above the other). In Garcia's (2014: 21) terms, the formally equal world of 'no-matter-what' is what makes the world of valuations and comparisons possible as its 'plane of reference'. Committed to developing a metaphysical system, Garcia (2014: 31) remains notably uninvolved with the phenomenal world because 'the world of important things lacks the flat world' and it is the latter that concerns him.

Once Garcia has carried out his formalizing purification of the world from valuations, what is left is a view of reality that exists by itself only for itself, unable to provide any other foundation than the principle of 'levelling' according to which 'no thing is more important than another' (Garcia, 2014: 31–32). So far so good, but the question that Garcia (2014) has curiously little to say about is, how exactly to appropriate this flattened grasp of reality for understanding something that exists in the phenomenal world of signifying, categorizing and hierarchizing – a world where thought and action intertwine.

Here is the crux of the matter: in Ash's reading of Garcia's flat ontology, there is something missing between the philosophical imaginary of form and the phenomenal world where bump stocks matter, and that missing thing is an epistemic system that speaks to both without being reducible to either. In the ontological style of writing, the use of an alternative ontological grammar tends to be proposed as a theoretical argument, while what results may be little more than a re-description of the phenomenal world in other terms (Abrahamsson et al., 2015). Whereas such world descriptions are intriguing, and indeed novel, it is often difficult to see how they add value to understanding the world of importance and political contestation because they have won their novelty precisely by turning away from it (Malm, 2018).

Yet, if we wish the ontological turn to function as more than a novelty machine, to yield more-than-academic outcomes and be consequential beyond the neoliberal university, we need convincing ways to link this work back to social practices in real societies. To this end, it would be useful to every now and then perform a reality check by asking, for instance, can I theorize something *better* with an alternative ontology.

Admittedly, it is unfair to assess the merits of Ash's work by asking what it can teach the legislator, as I have done in this commentary. After all, in the concluding section of the article he proposes to calibrate certain elements of flat ontological

thinking in ways that are easy to agree with, such as their tendency to emphasize connectedness, emergence and contingency over division, consistency and necessity. Moreover, I do consider Garcia's formalist ontology an interesting position that merits the attention it has been given in the paper. Ash's is a welcome contribution toward a deeper critical engagement with the premises of the ontological turn and its impact on theoretical debates in human geography.

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