

Form and the politics of world

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Abstract

In this commentary, I respond to Engelmann, Häkli, Harman and McCormack's reading of my article, 'Flat ontology and geography'. In doing so, I argue that a flat ontology of form developed in the article is only a starting point for analysis rather than a fully-fledged theory. In turn, I reflect on how the notion of form can be further developed to identify and analyse mechanisms of inequality that lead to a range of issues for all manner of humans and non-humans.

Keywords

differentiation, form, flat ontology, inequality

I would like to begin by thanking Engelmann, Häkli, Harman and McCormack for their careful responses to my article (Ash, 2020a). The comments are rich and insightful, and in the short space provided I can't respond in the detail that their thoughts deserve. Instead I will draw out four points that seem to cross between their remarks, which focus on issues of temporality, embodiment, politics and worlds. In doing so, I will use these themes as an opportunity to provide important clarifications about the approach I offer and how it is being developed across my current and future work.

First, Engelmann (2020) and McCormack (2020) are concerned that there is a lack of temporality in my account of form and in the method of de-determination employed to differentiate between entities. As Engelmann puts it: 'Ash produces an a-temporal, yet spatialised, bullet-time view'. This lack of temporality, they suggest, leads to a number of issues. Specifically, McCormack points out that the singular focus on the bump stock as a technical object means that longer temporal trajectories about how the bump stock was designed, manufactured,

marketed, sold and so on are not taken into consideration. McCormack suggests my account of form requires temporal stretching, which would not only 'stretch out the form of the bump stock in time', but also 'its relations with other entities'.

It is important to be clear here that the method of de-determination offered in the article cannot, *on its own*, provide an account of events, temporality, space, causality or many other things. This is because, for me, a flat ontology is not a complete system of thought. Rather, flat ontology is a starting or orientating point, where basic presuppositions are made that go on to (de)limit the kind of further analysis that is possible. For instance, if the form of entities is taken seriously, then how space and time are theorised also changes. As I argue elsewhere (Ash, 2020b), space can be understood as a dual process of differentiation and distantiation

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based on the form and (a)symmetry of comprehensions of entities. Such an account of form also alters how time is understood. As I will develop in future work, time does not have to be considered through the lens of the present, but can be analysed as the way that comprehensions are sequenced within a stack of other comprehensions. Using the concept of form to develop accounts of space and time, it is certainly possible to analyse actual events in which particular entities have effects, or how events (of design, of manufacture, etc.) may be spatially and temporally linked to one another, but this would require serious and engaged further work that was not possible to complete in the main article.

Second, Engelmann is concerned there is a lack of embodiment in the narrative of the bump stock given in the article. As Engelmann (2020) summarises:

the body is detached from a single human's identity and is assessed as another 'thing' . . . Indeed, more so than the bump stock or the rifle, the body may resist a flat ontology of form, because it cannot be so neatly de-determined into objects, parts or edges.

Like an account of space and time, there is no explicit theorisation of the body in the article. Again, this was not the aim of the paper (which was to offer a way of differentiating between entities). It is true that I do offer an abstracted notion of particular aspects of a body in order to account for where a bump stock begins and ends. However, this is absolutely not an account of embodiment. This is not to say that the concept of form is necessarily incapable of providing such an account. Indeed, I would argue that the concept of form introduced here offers the potential for a very rich notion of embodiment and difference. This notion would be sympathetic to a post-humanist position, which would look to trouble or disrupt the idea that there are 'single humans' or consider humans as individuals (Braidotti, 2013). Rather, embodiment could be understood as a set of entities that are not delimited or demarcated by an epidermal limit. To be embodied is always to be distributed among many things (Hutchins, 1996) that are temporally and spatially differentiated and distantiated from one another. As I discuss

elsewhere (Ash, 2020b), how entities are differentiated and distantiated from one another is key to what they can do and how they can do it (and in turn might inform how they are classified by others). Therefore, an account of form offers the beginnings of thinking through a micro-physics of distributed embodiment, and this is something that I am developing in ongoing work.

Third, Häkli (2020) and McCormack (2020) worry that de-determination, as a formal account of trying to ascertain what a thing is, creates issues when thinking about the 'wider' politics that any entity is involved in. For McCormack, this is an issue because he believes that 'I don't think the politics (legal or otherwise) of bump stocks can be reduced to anything. Nor can the legal or formal politics of bump stocks be bracketed from the wider political worlds in which guns are implicated'. I think McCormack's statement about 'wider political worlds' and their 'bracketing' is key here (and relates to Engelmann's point about embodiment that I discuss above). It seems to me that some form of minimal bracketing is necessary in any analysis, political or otherwise, of any phenomenon or entity. This bracketing may be phenomenological ('I perceive and identify this entity or set of entities as an issue'), analytical ('I am focusing on this problem or issue from this perspective'), methodological ('my method will only give me access to particular types of data that will be recognised by particular constituents in different ways') and so on. To be sure, how bracketing takes place is political, but it is not something that can simply be avoided. In this regard, I would rather begin with a method for identifying entities that are linked to particular problems or issues so at least those bracketings are clear and open to interrogation from the outset.

Fourth, the question of bracketing is also connected to the notion of world that several commenters discuss. For McCormack (2020), defining entities in relation to a flat world does not account for the multiple worlds that he considers to exist in relation to any issue. I recognise this point but wonder about the use of the term world itself. Specifically, if you want to follow the line that there are multiple worlds at any one moment that an entity can impinge upon differently, then this raises a

number of questions. For example, where does a world or worlds begin and end and how are such worlds distinguished from one another? If the response is that worlds overlap one another and operate in a continuum, then it appears that we are not really talking about multiple worlds at all. Rather we are talking about *a* world, understood as a holistic set of relations. Current human geographical theory deals with the issues of holism by arguing that relations between entities do not produce holism because these relations are never fully actual, instead emerging from a virtual or potential realm. However, as I argue in the main article, strongly relational forms of flat ontology can result in accounts whereby entities are reduced to how they appear in given situations. I think the question of how multiple entities form a particular set and how these sets relate to one another is highly important and this is something that I want to develop in future work. Whether the term ‘worlds’ is useful to describe these sets remains to be seen for now.

In a different manner, Häkli (2020) suggests the account of world that I draw from Garcia is too abstract and McCormack (2020) argues it lacks affect. However, I would like to push back against this a little and state that while an account of world might appear to be abstract, it actually orientates human geographical analysis towards the concrete and sensual universe because any entity is partly defined in relation to a world that is so flat, empty and formal. In identifying where an entity ends and the world begins (or vice versa), analysis can focus on how entities comprehend one another and how these comprehensions produce change and difference. In doing so, investigation can be centred on the generative mechanisms of how entities come into being and change in the phenomenal realm, rather than locating the productive source of entities in a non-phenomenal realm (such as virtuality or potentiality) that can remain unanalysed.

Finally, I would like to comment more generally on my reading of *Form and Object*, which Harman (2020) focuses on in his response. It is important to state that my aim in reading Garcia is not only to apply Garcia’s ideas, but to also develop them in ways that can be relevant to human geography and other social sciences. In this sense, the work

presented in the article is not strictly Garcian. For example, as Harman rightly points out, my account of de-determination does not absolutely de-determine the bump stock, because I still include hands that would require a bump stock to operate in relation to a rifle. Furthermore, I do not treat the body of a shooter and a bump stock equipped rifle as absolutely symmetrical. As I hope to develop in future work, this is because the potential that I see in Garcia’s account of form, world, object and thing is how such terms can provide a starting point to develop new ways of thinking about the asymmetry and inequality of entities, which extends beyond a purely formal analysis of particular entities. For instance, as I am currently exploring in research with collaborators Rachel Gordon and Sarah Mills, these inequalities might include how digital entities such as cursors, coins and menu items are arranged to induce asymmetrical purchase decisions in children and young people using gambling-style systems in digital games.

To conclude, the aim of the main article was to produce a minimal kind of flat ontology that can operate as a starting point for analysis in order to differentiate between entities. Beyond this point, producing a flat ontology of form is also useful because it locates the majority of explanatory power in mechanisms of comprehension that occur among actual entities, while recognising that entities are not entirely contingent on their relations with other entities. I hope that my current and future work can demonstrate the complexities of these mechanisms in more detail, with the aim of producing fine-grained accounts of how the inequality of different types of entities are implicated in the many issues humans and non-humans face.

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