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# Geography and ethics: non-representational encounters, collective responsibility and economic difference

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**Key words:** ethics, labor, non-representational theory, responsibility.

## I Introduction

Human geography seems especially invigorated these days. Geographical scholarship is abuzz with passion, performance and affect, infused with a sense of playfulness and a spirit of optimism and experimentation. All of this appears to betoken a new understanding of ethics, as well, one that is less about dour denunciations of injustice or sober analyses of normative principles, and more about enhancing, and celebrating, our immersion in Being. Most of the work expressing this new spirit can be placed under the umbrella term of ‘non-representational theory’, a label that even its proponents acknowledge is rather imprecise, but which at base signals a renewed interest in materialist, corporeal and performative ontologies.

Non-representational theory has been the subject of significant discussion already (see H. Lorimer, 2005; 2007; Whatmore, 2006) and I make no attempt to provide a full

review here. But I do wish to ask whether this approach might offer a different set of resources for considering matters of ethics and responsibility. It would seem so on the surface, and indeed ‘ethics’ is a term that appears with regularity in work from a non-representational perspective. With a few notable exceptions, however, the notion of ethics invoked has remained implicit, and my sense is that a more sustained examination of the intersection between ethics and the new materialism may be warranted. My aim in what follows is to begin this task. As we will see, my overall impression is that recent forays into non-representational and materialist ontology have considerable potential to ‘extend the field of the ethical in which geographers might move’ (McCormack, 2003: 488), but that there nevertheless remains an opportunity to orient the discussion in some new, and potentially productive, directions.

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## II Non-representational encounters and affective ethics

As other commentators have noted, non-representational theory is a difficult body of work to summarize, and its adherents draw upon a diverse array of resources and inspirations (see Thrift, 2004a). The most frequent companions are undoubtedly Spinoza (eg, Thrift, 2003a) and Deleuze (Dewsbury, 2003), but they also include Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (Wylie, 2005; Kraftl, 2007), Alain Badiou (Dewsbury, 2007), Ernst Bloch (Anderson, 2006a), and the more recent writings of William Connolly (2002), Brian Massumi (2002) and others.

This is a disparate collection of voices, to be sure, but what their work shares is an approach that can to some extent be called 'non-representational' in the sense outlined by McCormack: 'first, it valorises those processes that operate before ... conscious, reflective thought ... [and] second, it insists on the necessity of not prioritizing representations as the primary epistemological vehicles through which knowledge is extracted from the world' (McCormack, 2005: 122). This kind of approach, then, works toward some kind of embodied materialism that places a significant emphasis on questions of action, practice and, especially, performance (Dewsbury, 2000; Thrift, 2004b), as both an object of inquiry and a particular style of research. Recent studies have examined a wide range of performative activities, such as dance (Thrift, 2000; McCormack, 2003; Somdahl-Sands, 2006); musical performance (Revell, 2004; Morton, 2005); hiking (Wylie, 2005); kayaking (Waite and Cook, 2007); gardening (Crouch, 2003); rave (Saldanha, 2005); listening to music (Anderson, 2004); and children's play (Harker, 2005). What unites these disparate forms of practice is a significant experience of pre-reflective 'doing', a corporeal immersion in what Thrift has called 'the immediacy of the now' (2003b: 2020).

So what are the implications of this trend for thinking through questions

of ethics? The short answer is that non-representational theory has opened up a consideration of what McCormack has termed 'an ethics of enactment' (McCormack, 2005: 142) – the ways in which various kinds of bodily performances take place and, more importantly, the ways in which they might enhance our affective capacities and engender new forms of engagement and responsibility.

The most forthright discussion of ethics within non-representational theory can be found in the work of Derek McCormack, J.D. Dewsbury and Nigel Thrift. The most extensive treatment remains McCormack's (2003) reflections on his participation in Dance Movement Therapy. Upon considering the kinds of bodily movements and sensations that constitute this practice, McCormack detects a different kind of ethos, 'a way and style of acting into the world ... [that] may come to express lines of ethical potential' (McCormack, 2003: 501). Such an ethos is attentive to the nature of our bodily encounters, without seeking to submit them to an *a priori* set of rules or moral judgments. In so doing, this approach 'shifts the burden of the ethical away from the effort to do justice to individual subjects, and towards a commitment to develop a *fidelity to the event* (Badiou, 2002) as that through which new spaces of thinking and moving may come into being' (McCormack, 2003: 502). Dewsbury argues in similar fashion, calling 'attention to the ethical possibilities held in potential within our every act given that this is a world in which the metaphysical referent for truth is now in doubt' (2003: 1908). From this perspective, ethics should not be considered a matter of adjudicating action or seeking to enforce proper conduct. It is, instead, a question of 'giving space to the event of the world' (Dewsbury *et al.*, 2002: 439) or of what Dewsbury calls 'the soliciting of the event' (2003: 1926).

A first cut, then, at a non-representational ethics would highlight its commitment to being open to new possibilities, a kind of witnessing through which we are exposed to the

potential for being-otherwise (Dewsbury, 2003; Harrison, 2007). As Deleuze has put it, in a well-known formulation, 'no one knows ahead of time the affects one is capable of; it is a long affair of experimentation, requiring a lasting prudence ... you do not know beforehand what a body or a mind can do, in a given encounter, a given arrangement, a given combination' (Deleuze, 1992: 627). The question that perhaps follows from this is how, exactly, we might work to turn openings and events into spaces for ethical encounters. The answer, in Thrift's view, is that we need to search for corporeal engagements that have the potential to 'amplify responsiveness' and enhance our 'affective capacity' (Thrift, 2004b: 127, 128). A second cut, then, places emphasis on affect, and more generally on geography's recent and growing concern with bodily sensibilities and emotion (Davidson *et al.*, 2005).

The concept of affect has a complex lineage (see Thrift, 2004c; McCormack, 2007), but most discussions draw upon the ideas of Spinoza and Deleuze. Although neither philosopher offered a comprehensive ethical roadmap, both provide resources for thinking through what might be called an affective ethics of encounter. Spinoza, for his part, sets the stage by defining affect as the capacity to alter the body's 'power of activity' (*Ethics*, Part III, D3, in Morgan, 2006). Spinoza asserts in the *Ethics* that we should work to increase these affective capacities, suggesting 'that which so disposes the human body that it can be affected in more ways, or which renders it capable of affecting external bodies in more ways, is advantageous to man' (*Ethics*, Part IV, P38; Morgan, 2006). For Deleuze, Spinoza's call to expand the body's positive affects was an ethical imperative to facilitate encounters that maximize desire or joy. 'The ethical question ... in Spinoza', Deleuze insists, '[is] first of all: *How can we come to experience a maximum of joyful passions?*' (Deleuze, 1990: 246).

In geographical versions of this kind of materialism, then, we get a view in which

'everyday moments of encounter can be cultivated to build an ethics of generosity by stimulating affective energy' (Thrift, 2004a: 93). The goal might be described as a corporeal response-ability, 'an ethos ... which adds to the world by framing an energetics of encounter in creative and caring ways which add to the potential for what may become' (Thrift, 2004b: 127). A number of recent studies have sought to elaborate on this kind of ethos, by focusing attention on the material spaces through which our affective and ethical investments might be made manifest. Horton and Kraftl, for example, examine the mundane, embodied nature of children's geographies, describing childhood experience in terms of 'the affective connections between lives' (2006: 272). Obrador-Pons contends that nudism 'is a practice with ethical potential' (2007: 131) because its embodied aesthetic can cultivate a 'feeling of generosity toward the world, a care for life' (2007: 137), and Roe (2006) considers the affective ethics of consumption as a relationally embedded corporeal experience.

These examples highlight particular spaces of encounter, and investigate how our manner of dwelling within such spaces assists in 'facilitating the emergence of new ways of animating the present' (McCormack, 2005: 144). But it is not just the present that is at stake in these new non-representational geographies, for a consideration of affect also stresses our ethical orientation toward the future, as that-which-might-become. In this vein, Ben Anderson has examined the affective dimensions of hope. Drawing on ethnographies of domestic music listening practices, Anderson finds hope to be not simply an expression of optimism, but rather 'a positive change in the passage of affect' (2006b: 744). In similar fashion, Kraftl (2007) considers the function of utopia as what he terms an 'affective-ethical' ideal. 'The utopian and the ethical', he suggests, 'are intimately bound' (Kraftl, 2007: 140), calling attention to what Dewsbury has called 'our

ongoing and tentative endeavor to enact local utopias that seek to create situations for joyful encounters' (Dewsbury, 2000: 493).

### III Responsibility for the common

Taken as a whole, recent geographical work in a non-representational register has made novel and significant contributions to our understanding of socio-material events and encounters. It also speaks to a different kind of ethics, one that takes the form of an ethos rather than a morality or a set of principles grounded in universal norms or juridical constructs. Such an ethos works toward encounters that open us to a generous sensibility, one that might be capable of re-energizing our affective engagements with others and fostering a heightened sense for what might be possible.

If there is a lingering ethical challenge in such work, it might consist in thinking through the extent to which a fidelity to the event can be considered in any sense a shared commitment – whether, that is, the immanent ethics on offer perhaps emphasizes individual encounters and experiences at the expense of a more extensive vision of collective responsibility. My own take is that our ethical vision is likely to remain stunted if we limit ourselves to a consideration of the affective potentialities lurking within events and encounters, without also posing the broader question of how events and encounters become constituted as the locus of a shared sense of conviviality and solidarity. Ethics, that is, must to some extent be a collective affair, what Brian Massumi has called 'a tending of coming-together, a *caring for* belonging as such' (Massumi, 2002: 255).

There have been a number of attempts by geographers to examine this 'coming-together' of the social. A good example is Latham's examination of 'the sociality of public spaces' in Auckland using written and photographic research diaries. Latham views urban spaces as a kind of collective performance, comprised of non-cognitive and embodied practices that have the potential

to build solidarities (2003: 2001). From a somewhat different perspective, Laurier and Philo train their lens on the café as a localized site where sociality and conviviality are enacted. Drawing on Erving Goffman's ethnomethodology, they attempt to make visible the 'bodily gestures ... [through which] we on-goingly build, maintain and repair the architectures of our everyday intersubjectivity with others (known and unknown)' (Laurier and Philo, 2006: 195). At an even more intimate scale, Morton draws upon what she terms 'performance ethnography' to examine collective expression within Irish traditional music sessions, sessions which are dependent upon 'communication ... non-verbal clues or signals.. a sense from the body beside you ... [the ability to] anticipate and negotiate expression and variation as you play' (Morton, 2005: 672).

This kind of work demonstrates that event-spaces are a collective accomplishment. To speak of an ethics of enactment, then, is also to call into question the nature of the social, and the ways in which it is, or is not, figured as a site of collective responsibility and mutual regard (Popke, 2008). We can usefully turn here to the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, who articulates a collective ontology that asserts, as a first principle, our Being-in-common. As Nancy puts it, 'to want to say "we" is not at all sentimental, not at all familial or "communitarian."' It is existence reclaiming its due or its condition: coexistence' (Nancy, 2000: 42).

Nancy's work has not received widespread attention by geographers (although see Panelli and Welch, 2005; Welch and Panelli, 2007), but it suggests the need to theorize the meaning and contours of the in-common, and the ways in which its spaces can become sites of ethical responsibility. This task would appear to be particularly urgent in an era of neoliberal governmentality, in which the individual is hailed as the locus of ethical agency. This is a point made forcefully by Braun and McCarthy, in their commentary on Hurricane Katrina:

the lives of citizens are enhanced by, and indeed inseparable from, the construction of collectivities (consisting of humans and non-humans) that increase peoples' capacities to act ... accordingly, what is needed is a political language and imagination that takes as its starting point not the 'individual' of liberalism, but the 'being-with' or 'being-in-common' that Nancy so brilliantly locates at the center of human existence. (Braun and McCarthy, 2005: 808)

If we are to pursue this kind of ethics and politics, aimed at expanding the in-common of the social, then this logically brings to the fore a different set of questions, regarding the kinds of entities that are to be enfolded into the common or collective. Here, a significant body of work in geography has drawn upon the resources of actor-network theory to trace the ways in which the materialities that comprise the social are brought into relation. Through this work, we have come to understand the manner by which such relations become forged as a result of various kinds of agencies and calculations. What is still needed, perhaps, is a way of attending to the responsibilities that might be implicated in these assemblages, what Hinchliffe and Whatmore call a 'politics of conviviality that is serious about the heterogeneous company and the messy business of *living together*' (2006: 134).

One lesson we learn from recent geographical scholarship is that, as Bingham puts it, 'we are collectively in the midst of things' (2006: 496). That is to say, we are entangled, in ethical and political ways, with a panoply of non-human cohabitants: corncrakes and stag beetles (J. Lorimer, 2007); honey bees and *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bingham, 2006); tinned carrots (Roe, 2006); peregrine falcons (Hinchliffe and Whatmore, 2006); commodities for sale at garden centers (Hitchings, 2007); and reindeer (Lorimer, 2006), among many others. Taken together, this work has opened the possibility of expanding what we mean by the in-common or collective. As Hayden Lorimer puts it in his examination of reindeer, 'in the conjoined,

sinewy lives of humans and reindeer we find other matter, other properties, and other forces drawn into the realm of "the social"' (Lorimer, 2006: 516).

Ethically, this reminder has the potential to widen the ambit of responsibility, to expand the 'potential affections afforded by [corporeal] encounters' (J. Lorimer, 2007: 928) and to increase our 'openness to difference ... to allow for non-human knowledgeabilities' (Hinchliffe *et al.*, 2005: 653). Nick Bingham (2006), drawing on both Nancy and Derrida, goes even further, suggesting that what may be required is a 'politics of non-human friendship' to help act upon our responsibilities toward the community of others with whom we share a collective and common world (also Hinchliffe *et al.*, 2007).

#### IV Debating the political

What such a politics might entail, however, is far from clear, and opinions differ as to just how open-ended our affective potentialities really are, much less how they might be politically mobilized in a manner that enriches our sense of responsibility for the common. Even as we explore new ways of marshalling both affective energies and materialities into new kinds of engagement and assembly, then, we should keep in mind that our socio-material worlds are still shaped by power in very specific ways.

Take, for example, actor-network theory. As John Law acknowledges, ANT's refusal to draw an analytical distinction between people and objects 'sets the alarm bells of ethical and epistemological humanism ringing'. Law's response is that 'we need ... to distinguish between ethics and sociology ... [T]o say that there is no fundamental difference between people and objects is an analytical stance, not an ethical position' (Law, 1992: 4). Perhaps so, but our analytical stances are themselves performative, helping to gather up and constitute the social as a potential site of ethical responsibility and political efficacy. In this regard, some commentators have detected within ANT

a kind of naïve empiricism, which evades the difficult political work of judgment and decision. As Kirsch and Mitchell argue, ‘it remains important that we insistently raise the question that ANT wants so much to forestall: why are “things as such” produced in the ways that they are – and to whose potential benefit?’ (Kirsch and Mitchell, 2004: 702).

Latour and others contend that the refusal to explicitly specify the power relations embedded within networked materialities is in fact a means of highlighting their unlikely and tenuous character, to open them as sites of negotiation. ‘Is it not obvious’, asks Latour, ‘that only a skein of weak ties, of constructed, artificial, assignable, accountable, and surprising connections is the only way to begin contemplating any kind of fight?’ (Latour, 2005: 252). A similar sentiment lies behind much of the recent geographical engagement with non-representational styles which, as we have seen, has among other things aimed to cultivate a greater sense of openness and heighten our awareness of what might be possible in any given event or encounter. As Nigel Thrift argues, therefore, ‘the performative approach ... wants to make things *more* political, *much more* political, in that, above all, it wants to expand the existing pool of alternatives and corresponding forms of dissent’ (Thrift, 2003b: 2021).

There is not, however, universal agreement on this point. Arun Saldanha (2005) and Deborah Thien (2005), for example, have both expressed a sense of disquiet that non-representational approaches are hampered by what Saldanha charges is an ‘inability or refusal to account for how experience can consolidate power relations’ (Saldanha, 2005: 717). There is a sense, in other words, that the materialist ontologies under consideration here proceed as though ‘an undifferentiated people have the power to make bargains with their fortunes’ (Thien, 2005: 452). It seems useful to acknowledge, then, that our affective encounters seldom take place in

a space free from the exigencies of the real social relations and emotional investments that inflect our ethical orientations and influence our opportunities. This in turn suggests that any attempt to facilitate greater generosity and the building of collectives will eventually need to come to grips with the epistemologies – and yes, representations – through which we come to view our ethical and political horizons of possibility.

Indeed, we may argue that this task constitutes an important form of ethical responsibility. This is a point made eloquently by Matthew Sparke in his recent book, which draws upon the ideas of Derrida and Spivak to argue for a critical geopolitics figured as geographical responsibility. In a diverse series of deconstructive readings, Sparke uncovers the elided traces lurking within dominant US and Canadian geopolitical and geoeconomic narratives. What we need, he insists, is a ‘non-moralistic form of geographical critique: a spur to respond ethically to the erasures represented by any particular geography’ (Sparke, 2005: xvi).

This kind of work highlights the continuing importance of pursuing an ethics and politics of deconstruction, one with the potential to open up institutions and juridical arrangements – indeed, networked configurations of all kinds – as sites of decision-making and, therefore, of ethical responsibility. It is a reminder that, while the in-common of the social may be ontologically and materially performed, it is performed on a stage whose architecture is, at least to some extent, shaped by a set of powerful global narratives that still have much to say about the nature of our events, encounters and collectives.

## **V Cooperative labor and economic difference**

If this is so, then it should seem clear that chief among such narratives is neoliberal capitalism, a case that Bruce Braun makes in an appreciative review of Sarah Whatmore’s *Hybrid geographies*. Here’s how Braun puts it:

It seems to me that what an immanentist ontology teaches us is *not* that capitalism has no existence, only that the very possibility of Capital naming a real-world process is *inseparable* from the heterogeneous associations that constitute its 'ground' ... to the extent that such networks are constituted with particularly 'capitalist' characteristics and connections, the analysis of capitalism, its institutions, and its imperatives, is clearly on the table. (Braun, 2005: 839–40)

Braun is approaching the issue from an actor-network perspective, but the same, I think, can be said for non-representational approaches. Such a stance might lead one to consider capitalism's affective forms and energies, and the ways in which its institutions and imperatives shape our corporeal engagements and encounters, as well as the work of assembling collectives.

I want to suggest that resources for this kind of project can be found in the work of Antonio Negri, a theorist whose philosophy – in both its materialist foundations and its ethical principles – shares remarkable affinities with recent non-representational approaches in geography. Geographical engagements with Negri's work have tended to focus on the geopolitical arguments laid out in *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004), his two books with Michael Hardt (eg, Sidaway, 2005; Sparke, 2005). But behind the sweeping global vision set forth in those works lies a vitalist ontology and ethics that is heavily indebted to the ideas of Spinoza. Some of Negri's essays on Spinoza have recently been collected in an edited volume (Negri, 2004) which, combined with his book *Time for revolution* (Negri, 2003), provides a useful entry point to his ideas.

Negri's perspective differs from most non-representational theory in two key respects. First, it is aimed at illuminating the constituent power of the *collective subject*, what he calls, following Spinoza, the multitude: 'Spinozism has always represented a reference point in the critique of modernity, for it opposes to the conception of the subject-individual ... a conception of the collective

subject, of love and the body as powers of presence' (Negri, 2004). Second, whereas geographers have tended to read Spinoza by way of Deleuze, Negri's path takes him first through Marx, and in particular, Marx's labor-centered ontology of production. What non-representational theory figures as 'practice' or 'performance' is for Negri, following Marx, a social ontology based in the sensuous activity of living labor. "'Living labor'", Negri states, 'means, purely and simply, the power to create being' (2003: 42).

I lack the space here for a full elaboration of these ideas, but I want to suggest in closing that an ethics and ontology of collective labor might offer a bridge between the vitalist materialisms that appear to be flourishing of late, and geography's long-standing tradition of examining the geographical manifestations of capitalism, including considerations of work and labor. As Gidwani and Chari have put it, 'geographies of work ... pull our attention to the acts of fabrication that sustain life, species being, and *socius*' (Gidwani and Chari, 2004: 477). Importantly, I think, these 'acts of fabrication' have ethico-political implications, which have been under recent examination.

Exemplary in this regard is J.K. Gibson-Graham's *A postcapitalist politics* (2006), which aims to develop 'new ethical *practices of thinking* economy and becoming different kinds of economic beings' (p. xxviii). Their book combines the narration of several action research projects with a series of strategic and deconstructive readings, through which Gibson-Graham inscribe difference into what we conventionally think of as the economy. They draw suggestively on Jean-Luc Nancy to highlight what they call our 'economic being-in-common' and to re-envision the economy as an 'ethical space' where orientations of care and solidarity are foregrounded (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 86, 84).

Gibson-Graham's work is central to an emergent research community focusing on 'diverse economies' (Gibson-Graham, 2008) or 'post-structural political economy'

(Le Heron, 2007). The overall achievement of this work has been to open the economy as a site of ontological difference, and to view it as a domain for the production and performance of cooperative labor and economic subjectivity. Such work shares, in this regard, the 'performative ontological politics' of much non-representational theory, but with a key difference, for it calls explicitly for the strategic deployment of representation, with the aim of bringing another economy into being (Gibson-Graham, 2008). This 'other economy', furthermore, is grounded in the performance of encounters and solidarities that would not be possible within the epistemologies of capitalism. Thinking beyond capitalism, in other words, is indispensable to a project aimed at cultivating new kinds of events and encounters, and expanding the kinds of affects of which we are capable. It is in this sense, perhaps, that we can agree with Negri's assertion that 'Spinoza's innovation is actually a philosophy of communism' (Negri, 2004: 100).

## VI Conclusion

If I were to sum up my own perspective on ethical geographies, it would be some version of Antonio Negri's simple aphorism that 'ethics is the responsibility for the common' (2003: 183). If this is so, then recent work is contributing to the development of ethical geographies in a number of ways. It has provided rich insight into the ways in which we construct, perform and account for our being-in-common with both human and non-human others. It has shed light upon the affective capacities and caring relationships through which we tend to the in-common, and the forms of responsibility that inhere within such relationships (Popke, 2006). And, finally, this work has sought to widen the scope of our ethical responsibilities, to cultivate a more cosmopolitan and hospitable imaginary and an expanded sense of the collective (Popke, 2007).

Some may argue that we have lost sight of the ever-accumulating list of injustices

and ethical lapses that define our present. As I view it, however, we are perhaps just learning to see differently, to be more attuned to the ways in which the in-common is always-already a collective performance, brimming with affect, care and hidden potentialities. We have begun to understand that 'collectively, at every moment, this miracle of new being is offered to us through the thousand and one singular actions of each being. The world glitters' (Negri, 2004: 7).

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