

Originary *différance*: “A quantum vitalism”

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Abstract

Review of Alexander Wendt, *Quantum Mind and Social Science: unifying physical and social ontology* (2015).

KEYWORDS

deconstruction, mind/body division, quantum entanglement, status of the error

*My own “aha!” moment came in 2001 after reading Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall's book *The Quantum Society* ... their basic idea – that the mind and social life are macroscopic quantum mechanical phenomena - hit me as just the kind of thesis that could help move philosophical debates in the social sciences forward. (Wendt, 2015, p. 2)*

Some of the deepest philosophical controversies in the social sciences are just local manifestations of the mind-body problem. So if the theory of quantum consciousness can solve that problem then it may solve fundamental problems of social science as well. (Wendt, 2015, p. 6)

I begin with these quotations because their sense of epiphany about the wonder and mystery of so many questions and dilemmas that swirl around the mind/body, ideation/matter, culture versus nature problematic continues to hold the attentions of many of us across the disciplines. Speaking personally, my own “aha!” moment comes when I catch at the astonishing intricacy of the Cartesian two-step that presumes that identities (of whatever sort) are essentially coherent, autonomous, and therefore separated from each other. The relentless beat of this model's binary tempo motors notions of causality and communication that presume a clear difference between cause and effect, sender and receiver, us and them. Inevitably, space and time are domesticated into easy legibility as separate moments, and within these co-ordinates time's arrow can be relied upon to give us our bearings. How should we proceed in the face of methodologies and even empirical research that suggest that such a frame of reference is more of an illusion than a reality, an error that we can only assume requires correction? I say this because surely, every one of us is inevitably committed and entirely persuaded by the illusion if we are to have any sense of self at all. But let me leave this difficulty for the moment and return to it later.

What I like about Alexander Wendt's *Quantum Mind and Social Science: unifying physical and social ontology* (2015) is that his particular mode of engagement with such difficulties isn't reliant on what has become something of a catechism about how we should proceed. To explain this, a great deal of social and cultural analysis has focussed on the political leverage of models and representations that are said to overlay an inaccessible truth, as if an unmediated reality is barred to us by dint of the human condition's will to re-present and symbolise. Given this, it is refreshing to read an argument whose curiosity exceeds this now predictable "not reality but a construction," or, "what you thought was nature is really culture in disguise." In short, this insistence that human exceptionalism is inherently *unnatural*, a break with nature that keeps us prisoner in the reflexive turns of a hermeneutic circle, has left us in something of a quandary when it comes to considering the efficacy of the sciences. Wendt is unashamedly interested in the nature of reality and doesn't eschew the value of scientific research in figuring a way forward.

With this as background, those of us on the arts and social sciences side of the academic ledger have several alternatives that might help us wrangle with the complacency of the current culture versus nature, mind versus body, representation versus *physis* analytic. We can expand our curiosity and venture into these seemingly abstract and difficult arenas of physics and mathematics, breaching disciplinary boundaries in search of the resonance and relevance of scientific research for our own projects. Indeed, Wendt offers a quite extraordinary example of this achievement in his lapidary explication of quantum theory; his interpretation is as fascinating as it is helpful. However, although my own interest in the provocations coming from the sciences has escalated exponentially over the years, and I regularly facilitate conversations across the humanities/sciences divide in my own institution, I have to confess that my status as interlocutor with the sciences is always that of the tolerated outsider, a supplicant, or deferring naïve who seeks information that presumably I don't already have. The asymmetry bothers me, and although I enjoy the frisson of these discussions that are very often about the problematic of translation as much as anything, I have decided to pursue my research in the assumption that the quantum problematic is ubiquitous and non-local. In other words, I am of the opinion that the humanities and social sciences are not without the resources to open this riddle: no remediation is required as even so called cultural and social analysis is replete with what I'll call quantum quandaries.

In *Telling Flesh: the substance of the corporeal* (1997), I first mounted an argument intended to complicate the mind/body division and the myriad political associations that align the body with woman, the feminine, the racial other, the animal, primordial matter – in short, with nature. The ontologising aspects of these comparative denigrations are well known in the humanities and strangely enduring, and for this reason understanding how this political economy is effectively reproduced has retained its importance. However, as "cultural constructionism" or "social constructionism" has become the explanatory mantra of this representational asymmetry a battery of questions has effectively been censored and the political agenda of Cartesianism unwittingly reinstalled; I say "unwittingly" because Cartesianism is routinely cited as the error that cultural constructionism will correct. To explain this, the logic of such correctives rests on the foundational assumption that language, the discursive - in short, cultural symbolic systems of whatever sort - have a "worlding" effect. According to this view, although reality appears self-evident and immediately accessible to us its "truth" is a second order manufacture (hence, the inverted commas), a subjective and culturally inflected process of interpretation that inevitably mediates nature *as such*. This back-projection of what came first by what presumably comes second effects a duplicity whereby culture masquerades as nature

and, as a result, the natural order of things can no longer appear as a prescriptive “given” to which we are inevitably subjected. Instead, what we have is the malleable stuff of cultural contestation and intervention; an internal reflexivity that is political through and through. By dividing (and removing) nature from culture and aligning culture with human exceptionalism we humans remain the author of our own destinies; the unequivocal site of the agential. Not surprisingly, we tend to take heart at the news that natural determinations are cultural propositions and investments in disguise, albeit ones whose seeming intransigence can define and shape our most intimate sense of self, hope and possibility.

Importantly however, *Telling Flesh* was not an argument that simply reversed the nature/culture, matter/ideation distinction by insisting that human species being is essentially *un-natural* in its difference; in other words, I did not assume that entities of whatever sort are *in* the world, appearing as separate individuations that might be aggregated - 1+1 ad infinitum - as if difference is a gap, an absence, a no-thing, an empty space or in-between something. Further, by generalising a form of vitalism whose force-field could productively be regarded as “life at work,” I ventured that perhaps thinking, agency, even self-reflection might be ubiquitous, even if, of necessity, morphologically exuberant in appearance and variety. The “self” in this case is a diffracted monism, holographic, chiasmatically articulated, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued, non-local in its animations; a “system” whose infinite re-presentations *of itself* collapse epistemology with/in ontology. Where my work was perhaps counter-intuitive at that time was that the sense of quantum reality - the space/time superpositions and non-local, superluminal “communications” and materialisations - were already apparent in the “atomic particle” of linguistics - the Saussurean sign.

Musing about this systemic vitalism that refuses to affirm the metaphysical adjudications of oppositional identification and judgement even as it affirms them, I came to the conclusion that if any one thing, whether a word, a photon, a cell, a notion, a gene, an animal or plant, is inherently diffracted across “the whole,” appearing here and not there, or there and not here, then even the beginning of it all would not simply be elsewhere or behind us, as a narrative of temporal moments, each cut adrift from the next, must automatically assume. In *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large* (2011) I built on the arguments in *Telling Flesh* to invert the “culture second, masquerading as first” story-line, instead suggesting that this holographic whole *is* nature writ large, with “writ” being the operative word; “hologram” means, literally, “writing the whole,” or, “whole writing.” I explored the riddle of this space/time entanglement through the notion of an “originary humanicity,” a notion intended to place the identity of human being under erasure so that we might further interrogate the how and what of its purported identity as exception. Are humans really the mutant aberrations who break free of nature’s pre-scriptive, programmatic “writing,” as the great Hegel scholar, Jean Hyppolite surmised? Hyppolite was musing about Jacques Derrida’s assertion that nature writes, and Hyppolite’s gloss on his doctoral student’s argument was to accede to its most basic meaning as unintended scribble while assuming that human being heralds a radical break that initiates intention, mastery and authority. However, Derrida’s vision wasn’t about denaturing the human, but instead, by arguing “there is no outside language,” “no outside text,” we find the naturalisation of textuality leaves us with no reference point that isn’t entanglement and mutation. Not surprisingly, this strategy means that we can’t completely rely on any word or judgement whose reference point already assumes what it is to be human, and this will involve concepts such as agency, intention, language, cognition and the like. In other words, although we must use these terms in order to mount an argument of any sort, we can nevertheless attempt to acknowledge that their definitional truth, their exact capacities and properties, might say

more about the reflexive tautology that being human can install as its grounding justification – to be human is to use technology, to invent and use abstract language and so on.

To make the point, and it's an extremely difficult and elusive one, we might assume that these last comments are in keeping with sociologist of science, Bruno Latour's seemingly similar attempt to *dispense* agency to objects, apparatuses, ecologies and so on - a "distributed agency" - and that this strategic intervention would represent something of an assault on the need to equate agency and decision with *anthropos*. As I read it, this response to the latest accusation of political myopia and centrist pomposity, namely, human exceptionalism, will tend to assume what is in question, namely, human identity and its essential difference from objects. Not surprisingly perhaps, I have never seen the word intention used as a synonym for agency in these discourses. And so we are left with a dilemma. If we appreciate that there might be quantum implications on the level of banality, that quantum weirdness is in evidence not just on the micro-scale, as we are conventionally told, but all the way up, as only some physicists might concede (Barad, 2007, pp. 109-110), then what is to be done?

By way of an obsession with such paradoxes and their seeming contradictions I am happy to claim kinship with the many riddles and difficulties that Alexander Wendt explores. However, I'm not going to focus on the assumptions that I might share with Wendt – quantum consciousness, the recuperation of a reworked vitalism, a sort of holographic intra-subjectivity and so on. There is certainly a conversation here. But with very little space, I'd prefer to progress the conversation, not with the aim of finding solutions, as Wendt's opening remarks imply, but to further a sense of the "aha!" that can acknowledge and enjoy the labyrinthine dimensions of a question from which there is no easy release. I will confine myself to two questions – or perhaps, two sides of the same question - that might complicate this notion of "solution."

First, if we return to the two-slit experiment, which appears to most of us as weird indeed, we are usually struck by the behaviour of the photon and its compliance with the particular decision/apparatus of the human researcher. We wonder how this could possibly be the case. However, this particular way of understanding the results remains faithful to classical metaphysics. The quantum problematic is not resolved by parsing the experiment into the conventional wisdom of causality - an individual author/agent of the experiment (the site of cognition and species smarts); the technological apparatus (the equipment and the concept); and energy, presumed to be passive, compliant. As particle physicist, Karen Barad informs us, there are no individuated entities that precede their entanglement; a strange comment indeed, because the implication here is that the "decision" to experiment, to parse space/time into a particular onto-epistemological configuration, is generated by one, worldly/worlding phenomenon that exceeds its apparent location as caused or initiated by the human researcher. A quantum consciousness must begin here, with originary *différance*/diffraction, and surely, the investment in "the human" as an exception who arrives and gives order to an inchoate universe must be placed under erasure. My question is, can we progress this inquiry without returning to a Cartesianism writ large?

I can perhaps clarify why this question holds my attention by putting it another way. If we conclude that some sort of anthropic principle is universal and somehow at work, that we should begin our analysis in terms of a diffracted/holographic starting point rather than an aggregation of separate, atomic entities/moments that pre-exist their relation, then within this wholism, or monism, we will be challenged to address what appears as an error, a mistake, an oversight; a dumb idea. The corrective, or solution, works in terms of binary structures, and yet we know that the reductionism of binarity (which also presumes autonomy and the simple separation of its terms) isn't easily remedied with a purportedly non-binary intervention; binary versus non-

binary = binary. In sum, what exercises my own interests at this time is how the whole, the all and the everything, the systemic enfolding of life – must comprehend so called errors, prejudice, Cartesianism, stupidity, cultural constructionism and naïve empiricism in their most uninterrogated forms. In short, the latter are not outside the quantum problematic and the riddle of entanglement. What do we make of solutions or errors in a holographic world?

It seems appropriate to close with a few lines from Jacques Derrida on this very theme of life and the life–sciences, firstly, because we tend to think of this philosopher and his “no outside text” as someone who refuses to engage with the sciences, and certainly not the quantum problematic: yet his entire oeuvre is testament to its ubiquity, where ideation is in/separable from the matter of the world, where “text” is a gene, an atom, a letter, and all at once. Here, in the following quotation, we find the “subject” that practices science is autoimmune – strangely split from itself, appearing as the “object” of the study, and also as the representation or model, the third term, that supposedly mediates the two separate entities:

The message does not emit something, it says nothing, it communicates nothing; what it emits has the same structure as it, i.e. it is a message, and it is this emitted message that is going to allow the decipherment or translation of the emitting message, which implies the absence of anything outside the message, the information, the communication. This is why we have to be clear here that the words communication, information, message, are intra-textual and operate on condition of text, contrary to what they ordinarily lead one to think, namely that they communicate, emit or inform something. (Derrida in Vitale, (2014, p. 109)

“Who” and “how” are we to position ourselves in this muddle?

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both the quantum microcosm and the gravitational macrocosm have been abstracted from the seamless, encompassing consistency of a fundamentally. 11-dimensional physical field¹³. As a result, the methodological conception underlying the program of.Â phenomenalisation; conditions upon which, if the latter are indeed `archi-originary', the phenomena investigated through scientific cognition are inevitably supervenient. 28. years after the publication of Darwin's *On the Origins of the Species*- this.Â ontological alternative, or even the difference, between living and dying. For an extended critique of Michel Henry's phenomenologisation of immanence, cf. *infra*, Chapter 2, pp.80-97. 46.